Toru Shiwasu
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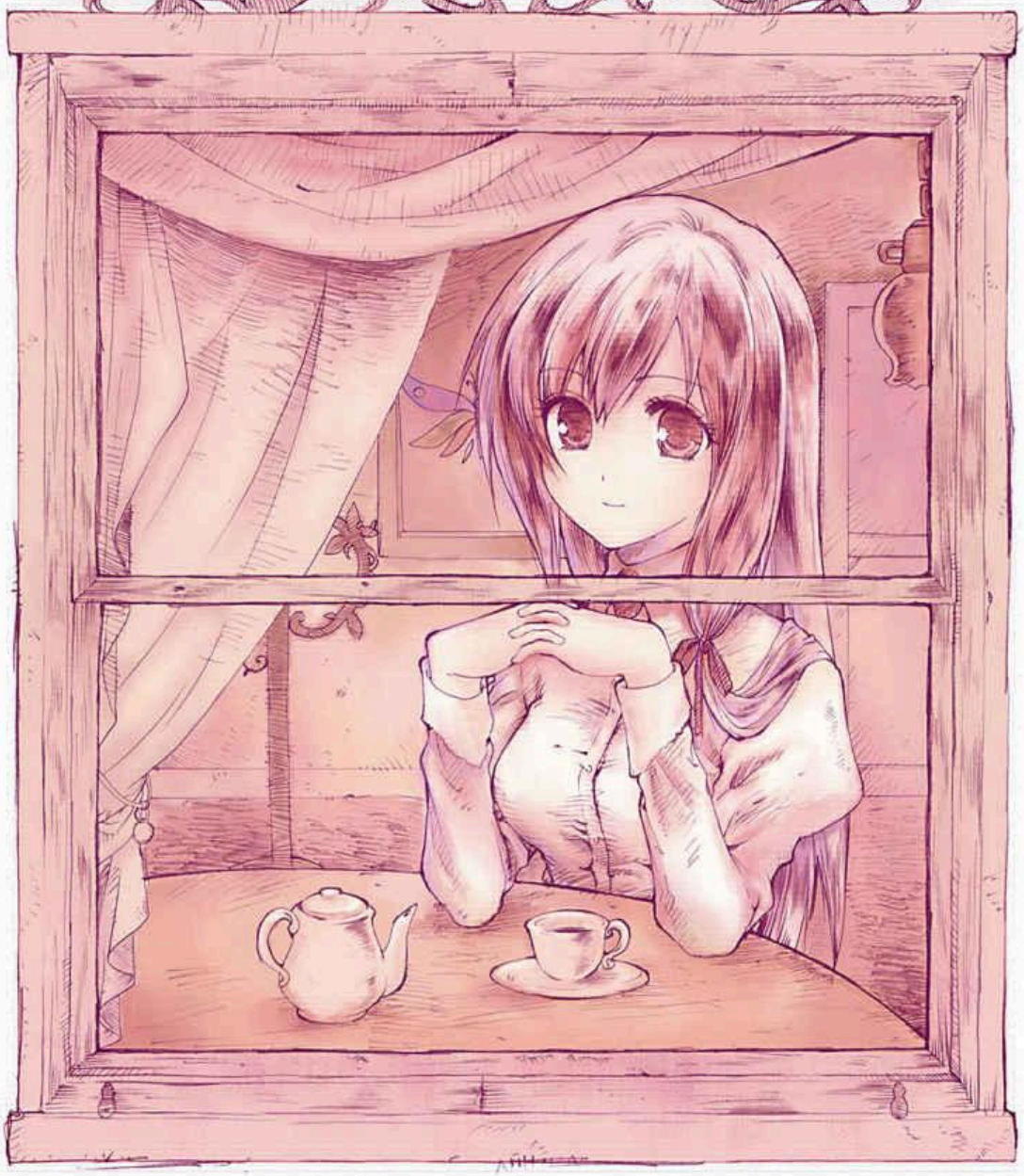
タクティカル ジャッジメント 9
Tactical Judgment
被告人・山鹿善行
FUJIMI
MYSTERY
BUNKO

Tactical Judgment



目が覚めたらいきなり野外。
手の中には血塗れた包丁。
いったい
これはどーゆーことだ？・

「もし、山鹿先生があの人を
殺したのならそのときは――
私があなたを殺します。
どんな手を使っても」
制服美少女の目に
一瞬暗い炎が燃え上がる。
……復讐を口にする女ほど
コワイものはない。

Tactical Judgment Vol 9: Defendant Zenko Yamashika

By Toru Shiwasu

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for the prosecution

とうがさきひでお
東ケ崎英雄
超スゴ腕の検事
69戦69勝の記録を山鹿によって破られ、リベンジに燃えている

はねだしゅうこう
羽田修甲
若造刑事
因幡の部下。今回、事件をスピード解決して得意満面

いなばけん
因幡健
殺人課の刑事
コワモテのベテラン刑事

guest

えばたひろし
江畑弘
赤村紅助の秘書

こくしまことね
穀島琴音
江畑の恋人

えんだいゆうとく
遠大有徳
刑事部長

あかむらこうすけ
赤村紅助
市議会議員

あおたにそうた
青谷蒼太
市の総合政策部財政課課長

ふちだもえぎ
縁田もえぎ
特定建設業許可を持つ株式会社アタマハネの社長。一級土木管理技師所持

新人警官が、弁護士の運転するスピード違反の車を捕まえた。
「あんた二〇キロもオーバーしてたよ。ちょっと免許証を見せてください」
すると弁護士はしれっと答えた。
「そんなの持ってるわけねーだろ」
「なに、無免許運転だと？　怪しいな、そもそもこれはおまえの車なのか？　車検証を見せてもらおうか」
「違う、盗んだのさ。車検証ならダッシュボードの中にあったかな。拳銃をしまうときに見た覚えがあるぜ」
「なんだと、拳銃だって！　おまえ拳銃を持ってるのか？」
「ああ。車の持ち主を殺すのに使った。死体はトランクの中さ」
まだ経験の浅い警官は真っ青になり、とても一人では処理できないと無線で応援を呼んだ。

三〇分後、駆けつけたベテランの警官に弁護士は尋問されていた。
「あんた、無免許運転だそうだな？」
「何を言ってやがる、免許証ならここにあるぞ」
「……あれ？　でもこの車は盗難車で、ダッシュボードの中には拳銃があるそうだな？」
「盗難車だなんてそんなバカな！　ダッシュボードには車検証しか入ってないし、車の名義も俺の免許証と同じだろうが」
「……おかしいな。他にもトランクに死体があると聞いたんだが」
「はっはっは、笑えないジョークだな。今トランクを開けるから好きなだけ見てみろよ。ほら、カラッポだろう？」
「うーむ、新米のあいつはあんたが無免許運転で、車は盗難車で、拳銃がダッシュボードにあって、トランクには死体があると言ってたんだが……」
すると弁護士は肩をすくめてこう言った。
「とんでもない嘘つきだな。
もしかして、俺がスピード違反したとも言ってなかったか？」

A rookie police officer pulled over a speeding car driven by a lawyer.
"You were going 20 kilometers over the limit. Let me see your license."
The lawyer responded nonchalantly.
"I don’t have one."
"What?! You’re driving without a license? Suspicious. Is this even your car? Let me see the registration."
"Nope, I stole it. I think the registration is in the glove compartment—I saw it when I was putting my gun away."
"What?! A gun?! You’re carrying a firearm?"
"Yeah. I used it to kill the car’s owner. The body’s in the trunk."
The rookie officer turned pale. This was way beyond him, so he called for backup.
Thirty minutes later, a senior officer arrived and began questioning the lawyer.
"So, you’re driving without a license?"
"What are you talking about? My license is right here."
"…Wait. But this car is stolen, and there’s a gun in the glove compartment, right?"
"Stolen? Don’t be ridiculous. The glove compartment only has my registration, and the car is registered in my name."
"…That’s odd. I also heard there was a body in the trunk."
"Hahahah, that’s not even funny. Here, I’ll open the trunk—go ahead, take a look."
"Hmm… The rookie said you were driving without a license, in a stolen car, with a gun in the glove compartment, and a dead body in the trunk…"
The lawyer simply shrugged and said:
"Wow, what a liar. Let me guess—he also told you I was speeding?"

プロローグA
死亡フラグ

Prologue A: Death Flag

"Kotone, there's nothing to worry about. It's almost over, I got this. We'll soon be able to catch all those villains in one big sweep."

"Hiroshi. I think that's wonderful too. I really do... but please, don't do anything too reckless. After all, they're really bad people, right? And they have power. If they're cornered, who knows what they might do to you... I'm worried..."

"Don't worry, I'm not so foolish as to let myself be taken down by a bunch like them. Hey, do you know about the lawyer Yamashika?"

"Huh? Yes, I do. He's famous around here. You're talking about that lawyer who's almost like a walking joke, right?"

"Yeah, the one whose very existence is like a joke. I'm thinking of asking him to back me up. If anyone is a wild and reckless lawyer, it'll be him. He'll be a strong ally for sure."

"T-That's a good idea, Hiroshi! Uh, you know, they say 'fight fire with fire,' right? But isn't he also famous for not taking on many cases? Will he really help you?"

"It's fine. The only thing he hates is civil consultations and lawsuits. If it's just to have him as backup, I'm sure he'll take it."

"R-Really? I hope you're right..."

"There's really nothing to worry about. It'll be fine, everything will work out.

Hey, more importantly, aren't you graduating from high school this March? So then... if you're okay with it, how about we go on a trip somewhere? You know, like an overnight stay."

"H-Hiroshi! Oh, I'm so happy! I've been waiting for you to say that this whole time!"

人を呪わば穴二つ

プロローグB

Prologue B: Curses Come Home to Roost

"—And that's how it is. Setting up that wiretap microphone was worth the effort, wasn't it? Mr. Akamura, it seems your secretary is seriously planning to expose us. And of all people, they're planning to ask that lawyer, Yamashika, for help. We need to deal with this before it's too late."

"……Indeed, hearing this tape leaves me no choice but to believe it. We have to do something. It's only natural, but you'll help me out too, right?"

"Yes, given the situation, I will cooperate."

"W-Wait a minute, Mr. Aotani! Mr. Akamura, isn't this whole mess originally because of your secretary's misconduct? Why should we be the ones to clean up after it?"

"Hey, Rokuda. Who do you think helped you when you were drowning in debt, when your family ran away, and you were on the brink of either skipping town or hanging yourself, huh? And that's not all. Who do you think has been throwing you 1500 dollars every month just for lending your company's name, without asking you to do anything in return, huh?"

"N-No, I'm really grateful for that, no doubt about it. But still, this and that are two different things... So, Mr. Akamura, what exactly do you plan on doing about this?"

"Isn't it obvious? There's no way we can bring that whistleblower back into the fold now, especially after he's plotted an internal expose. And on top of that, the young man knows too much. So, there's only one option."

"…W-Wait, you're not saying… kill him, are you?"

"I think there's no other choice. Do you have a cleaner solution?"

"W-What are you all saying!? Please, hold on, this is far too dangerous! If we end up getting arrested by the police, everything will come out in the open! It's like poking a hornet's nest!"

"There's no need to worry, that won't happen. If one person were to act alone, there might be risks, but we have this many people here. Besides, apart from Mr. Akamura and me, none of you have any direct connection to the secretary, right?"

"I see, that's true. So, as long as my alibi holds up, none of you will be suspected, correct?"

"Exactly. It's a kind of 'exchange killing,' you could say. While we're at it, we should take care of the lawyer too. That way, we can deal with everything in one go."

"Hey, Mr. Aotani! Y-You can't be serious about this too!?"

"Mr. Rokuda, you should understand as well how dangerous this situation is. We have no other choice left. If that secretary exposes everything, we'll lose our wealth, our status, and our reputations."

"Aotani is right. We're all tied together in this mess. If it comes to light, we'll all end up in prison and live the rest of our lives being pointed at in shame. Rokuda, you know better than anyone how painful it is to live in misery."

"…That's… damn it. Fine, I get it. I'll do it…"

"Everyone seems to have understood. Mr. Rokuda, you don't need to worry. We already have a plan in place—"

第一章 終焉の山鹿善行 前編

Chapter 1: Zenko Yamashika's Demise (Part 1)

January 8th, 1:00 PM, Yamashika Law Office

The New Year's festive mood had finally come to an end after the first three days of January, and the world was beginning to return to its usual calm.

I, on the other hand, was still unable to escape the storm of misfortune that had been following me since the end of last year.

Just when I thought I had secured a date with Yukina, an unavoidable work assignment came in. Every little trick I tried to deceive the police backfired in the worst possible ways.

Still, I somehow managed to make another date with Yukina, but on the day of the date, my alarm clock mysteriously stopped, causing me to be late and ruining everything. I had to wait for the New Year to pass before I could get back in her good graces. As a result, my relationship with Yukina has made absolutely no progress. I'd like to think that at least it hasn't gone into the negative, but that's more of a subjective hope than anything grounded in reality.

And now, in the new year, the days of everything going wrong continue.

Three days ago, Satsuki left her cell phone at the office. Feeling irritated for no particular reason, I impulsively sent her a text that said, "You forgot your phone, you idiot."

Immediately, the phone sitting in front of me received a text message.

…It seems that nothing I do is going right lately, so two days ago, I decided to just sit quietly and read for a while.

I wasn't in the mood to deal with the world, but I figured if a book was getting good reviews, it might not be so bad. So, I picked up the paperback version of the bestseller "The Da Pinch Code", both volumes, and read them.

As the reviews suggested, it was a pretty good read, and I thought to myself that literature isn't so bad once in a while.

The next day, I went back to the bookstore and discovered that there was a middle volume as well.

This is how things have been going for me.

One misfortune after another. When I head to the bathroom, there's always someone already in there. The salt runs out, the miso runs out, the soy sauce runs out—the only thing that doesn't run out is the kitchen knife's sharpness. What kind of joke is this?

If there's a creator in this world, that guy's definitely a sadistic bastard. What kind of fun does he get from tormenting me like this?

In short, the conclusion is:

At this point, I was incredibly frustrated and itching for some kind of big courtroom fight to blow off steam.

And that's when a young man named Hiroshi Ebata showed up.

◆

"Please, have a seat."

Yukina served tea to both me and the guest before quietly stepping away.

At first, Ebata stared at Yukina as if mesmerized, but that only lasted for a moment. He quickly bowed his head in a gesture of respect and then looked away.

Just from that, I could get a slight sense of his personality. He didn't seem starved for female attention. In other words, he probably had a girlfriend. And judging by his demeanor, he was the type who would turn down any chance of fooling around, even if the opportunity presented itself.

While playing this little game of people-watching, I glanced down at the business card he had handed me.

Secretary to the City Councilor Kosuke Akamura, Hiroshi Ebata

I took another good look at the man sitting across from me on the sofa.

He was quite young—probably only two or three years older than me, at most.

His appearance was neat. He wore his suit and tie perfectly, giving the impression of a young, elite businessman working for a top company.

“So, Mr. Ebata, what brings you here today?”

The young man straightened his back and, in a voice that was both clear and confident, responded:

“I would like the esteemed lawyer Mr. Yamashika to serve as my backer.”

“A backer… you say?”

An unusual type of request. I was intrigued.

“And what exactly would that entail?”

“As it says on my card, I am the secretary to a man named Kosuke Akamura, a city councilor. Recently, I discovered something terrible. Mr. Akamura—well, no honorifics, "Akamura" has been abusing his position as a councilor to line his own pockets. I want to expose him.”

“I see. So, in other words, you’re planning to blow the whistle?”

“Yes, to put it simply.”

The situation was starting to make sense.

A whistleblower. It’s a term you hear more and more these days. Basically, it’s when someone inside an organization spills the beans about the shady stuff going on behind the scenes. Incidentally, as far as I knew, in English it was called “insider.” And no, it had nothing to do with the Japanese carbonated drink by a similar name.

In this case, the whistle was being blown not on an organization but on an individual in power, so I guess you could call it more of an “internal whistleblowing.” Either way, the basic premise of taking on someone with significant power remains the same.

The truth is, whistleblowers don’t usually end up in good situations. After all, it’s one person taking on a gigantic organization with significant power. It’s not just in fiction that you hear stories of people who expose corporate wrongdoing only to end up accused of embezzlement themselves and criminally prosecuted.

“I understand the situation. However, when you say you want me to be your backer, what exactly do you want me to do?”

“Simply put, I want you to watch over me.”

“Watch over you…?”

“Yes. My opponent is a city councilor who’s been elected five times—a seasoned veteran. In this local area, he wields considerable influence. If he finds out about my plan, he might pull strings with the police to have me detained. On top of that, in order to carry out the whistleblowing the way I’m planning, I’ll need to take some of the councilor’s property with me. That’s why I need you to keep an eye on me and act as a witness. At the very least, I need someone to confirm that I did nothing illegal if the police try to arrest me.”

Hmm. This was getting interesting.

I specialized in criminal trials, and I only took on cases that seemed interesting. But this request, while outside of my usual scope, was certainly piquing my curiosity. Essentially, we’d be going up against a corrupt politician with significant power. And while it wouldn’t involve a court trial, given the nature of the case, most of the action would likely take place outside the courtroom anyways. I’d been getting a bit bored with the usual criminal trials, and I was looking for something that might be entertaining. Plus, I’d been feeling rather frustrated lately.

“I see. I understand your request. But before we go any further, let me ask: what kind of wrongdoing has this Akamura councilor been involved in?”

“In short, he’s been handing out public works contracts under the table. Akamura is currently working with two other people. One is Sota Aotani, the head of the Finance Division in the city's General Policy Department. The other is Moegi Rokuda, the president of a construction company called Atahamane.”

Akamura, Aotani, and Rokuda, with surnames containing "red", "blue" and "green" respectively? The three primary colors?

The story that Hiroshi Ebata told me went as follows:

Akamura, who had served as a city councilor for five terms over a span of twenty years, had amassed considerable influence in the local area. His power base had been supported by local construction companies.

Akamura had used his influence to secure a large number of public works projects funded by the national government. It was only natural that the construction companies, who benefited from these projects, would be indebted to him.

However, simply securing public works projects didn't do much to line Akamura's personal pockets. This is where Akamura set his sights on Atahamane, a company that had become heavily indebted and was on the verge of collapse.

"Do you know how to make easy money from public works projects? You subcontract the entire project. In other words, for a project you've won for, say, 300 thousand dollars, you subcontract it to another company for 270, keeping a ten percent cut for yourself."

"Hmm, I see."

I had heard of such things in passing.

Incidentally, subcontracting itself wasn't technically a crime in the past, but ever since the enactment of some law aimed at ensuring the fairness of bidding contracts—I think it was called the Bidding Contract Optimization Law or something like that—it's become illegal. However, as long as you're only subcontracting a portion of the work, it's apparently not a problem, which means there are still plenty of loopholes. In the end, though, it's outside my area of expertise, so I'm not entirely sure.

"But Mr. Ebata, I don't know much about the inner workings of this, yet wouldn't the company receiving the subcontract barely make any money? I can't imagine there's a company that would take on a project knowing part of the fee has been siphoned off."

"Well, that's where they exploit the weak. First of all, only companies that have a special construction license are eligible to bid on public works projects. And to maintain that license, they must have a qualification, something like a first-class civil engineering management certification. Moreover, previous contract performance is also taken into consideration, so an average company can't even bid. And in today's economy, there aren't many jobs outside of public works projects. So, despite knowing they'll make no profit and will have to take on a loss, there are still countless companies that would jump at the chance just to stay afloat."

"But isn't the budget insufficient? In the end, wouldn't it just result in a deficit?"

"Yes. So, all the burden gets passed on elsewhere. They cut labor costs, or they reduce the cost of materials. In other words, it leads directly to shoddy construction."

"…That's a rather chilling story."

Apart from being neck-deep in debt, 'Atamahane Inc.' possessed all the qualifications necessary to win public works contracts.

That’s when the corrupt city councilor, Akamura, approached Atamahane’s creditors using both soft and hard tactics, and convinced the company’s president, Rokuda, to lend the company’s name as a dummy bidder for public works projects.

By merely lending out the company name, Rokuda could avoid being hounded by creditors and debt collectors. On top of that, he’d receive about 1500 dollars per month for living expenses. There was no reason for Rokuda to refuse Akamura’s proposal.

Thus, the groundwork for subcontracting public works projects was laid. However, public works projects must go through a bidding process, and if they didn’t win the bid, all their behind-the-scenes maneuvers would be for nothing.

But Akamura had a valuable ally—the head of the Finance Division in the city's General Policy Department, Sota Aotani. He had access to the projected winning bid prices for all public works projects.

"So, to sum it up, the corrupt councilor secures public works contracts from the government, the crooked official leaks the winning bid price, the figurehead president wins the bid, and the actual construction is subcontracted out to other companies."

"I see. A perfect three-way collaboration."

"Exactly. When the three of them work together, there’s nothing they fear. And as a result, roads and bridges with inadequate durability are sprouting up one after another."

"…Indeed, that’s not something we can just sit back and ignore."

Even I have a driver’s license, and I drive a car. If a bridge were to collapse and I died, that would be the last thing I’d want. I’ve already decided that my final resting place will be the courtroom.

"But Mr. Ebata, how exactly do you plan to expose this?"

"Well, about that… I apologize for the suddenness, but would you be able to spare some time tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow, you say?"

Of course, I had time. In fact, I had nothing but time.

But saying "Yes, I'm totally free" right away in situations like this somehow feels wrong—especially as a lawyer with a reputation to uphold.

So, I called out to the next room.

"Yuki… No, Misumi!"

"Huh? Oh, yes? What is it?"

Yukina immediately peeked her head out from the door connecting the adjacent room.

"Misumi, what's my schedule looking like for tomorrow?"

"Huh? Uh, what?"

Yukina was flustered by the sudden question.

But perhaps understanding my desperate eye contact, she pulled out the notepad from my desk and started flipping through it.

"Um, well… It looks like the schedule is pretty packed, but I think we can rearrange some things."

Nice, Yukina.

This will later be known as "Yukina's Scheduling Miracle."

"Got it, thanks. So, Mr. Ebata, it seems I should be able to free up some time. What exactly do you need tomorrow?"

"If you're willing to take on this case, I'd like you to come to the address on the business card I gave you—Akamura's office—at 6 PM tomorrow. I'll explain everything about how we plan to expose him then."

"Hmm."

This was certainly a strange request.

Why invite a lawyer like me to Akamura's office in the evening? If I think about it simply, it seems like he's planning to retrieve some kind of evidence from the office. And he wants me there as a witness to oversee it? If that's the case, it makes sense…

"So, does that mean no one will be at the office at that time?"

"…Y-Yes, that's right."

Ebata nodded, though a bit nervously. In other words, he was confirming my suspicions.

"There's a New Year's party for city councilors, so Akamura will be out tomorrow. And since it's still the New Year period, there won't be much work going on either. By 5 PM, the other staff members will surely have gone home."

I see. No doubt about it. He's planning to take some evidence from the empty office. But that's a dangerous game that could very well lead to a charge of theft if things go wrong. That's why he wants a lawyer on his side—to act as a witness and testify that the purpose was to expose someone, not to steal, and that he didn't touch anything other than the evidence.

If he's planning to blow the whistle on something this big, he needs to be extremely cautious. In that regard, this Ebata fellow seems to be quite sharp. Particularly, his choice of allies is spot on. Selecting me as his observer is likely the best choice available. There aren't many lawyers like me who are both detached from worldly concerns and unbound by any form of power.

So, when Ebata asked me this, my mind was already made up.

"What do you think, Mr. Yamashika? Would you be willing to take on this case?"

"Understood. Let's do it."

◆

After Ebata left, Yukina and Satsuki immediately came out from the next room.

"Mr. Zenko, that was quite an unusual request today, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, really unusual."

…They both started commenting, as if they had been eavesdropping.

The room next door was supposed to be soundproofed, but recently, the door's been coming loose, leaving gaps that make it easy to overhear things. So much for attorney-client privilege and confidentiality. Well, Yukina's fine since she's essentially my secretary, but the brat? I can't forgive that.

"So, you're finally taking on something other than a murder case. Though, if I recall, you've tried taking on smaller cases before and ended up in a bit of pain, didn't you?"

Normally, I wouldn’t bother responding to Satsuki’s remarks, but this time, I saw an opportunity to show off to Yukina.

"Hey, kid, think carefully. Both you and Yukina are residents of this city, right? It wouldn’t be good for you if shoddily constructed bridges and buildings started popping up all over the place in the future. So, I thought I’d help out if I could."

"Wow, don’t say stuff like that, or it’ll probably start snowing. If the trains get delayed, it’ll be a huge inconvenience. Or what, have you suddenly turned over a new leaf and become a do-gooder because you’ve been so nasty recently?"

"Come on, Ii'l Iyo. It’s not like Mr. Zenko is always scheming something. So let’s support him this time, okay?"

"…Yukina, do you seriously believe that?"

"Huh? Uh, hehe."

…Yukina. What was that laugh?

And Satsuki, for that matter, why does she always treat me as if I’m some sort of villain, always scheming something? No one has contributed to social justice as much as I have. Or is it that expecting basic understanding from a kid who advocates for communism is just pointless?

Well, whatever. No matter what the brat says, to me, it's just the barking of a defeated dog. The real problem is that I can't stand the idea of Yukina being corrupted by that brat. I guess I’ll have to tell Satsuki something educational to straighten out her thinking a bit.

"Listen up, kid. Pay attention."

"Huh? What’s with the sudden lecture?"

"There’s nothing wrong with a bit of hypocrisy. Mother Teresa once said, ‘The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow; Do good anyway.’"

"That’s a great quote. But what does it have to do with you?"

"..."

This is why dealing with kids is so frustrating. Nothing is more depressing than having a great quote completely misunderstood.

Still, I patiently continued.

"Listen, Mother Teresa also said, ‘If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. Be kind anyway.’"

"Yeah, so again, what’s that got to do with you?"

"..."

Enough. I give up. Explaining lofty ideas to a kid like this is a waste of time. It’s like giving pearls to swine. Or was it casting pearls before brats? Whatever it is, I don’t have time to deal with this right now, so I quickly went back to work.

And that’s when I finally realized:

The person who was supposed to be helping me with my work was nowhere to be found.

"Wait a second. Where’s that useless detective? Wasn’t he holed up in the next room with you guys earlier?"

"Kageno? If you’re looking for him, he’s sleeping on your bed."

Snap.

…I stormed into the next room, and—finding the socially maladjusted Kageno lying on my bed—I grabbed the sheets and, without a second thought,

"Kageno! What the hell are you doing in my bed?!"

I yanked the sheets off with all my strength.

With a series of comical sounds—*thud*, *crash*, *bang*—Kageno’s body rolled off the bed and hit the floor.

"Ugh… Damn it, Yamashika, that hurt! What the hell’s your problem?"

"Shut up! That’s my bed! You can’t just use it whenever you want! And you’re basically a breeding ground for lice and mites! Were you trying to contaminate my bed?! And cut that damn long hair already!"

"Shut up! Don’t criticize my hairstyle! And stop acting like I’m some kind of walking contamination! I wash my hair, okay? Fine, fine, I get it. I shouldn’t have used your bed. You’re right. It’s your bed, only for you. I shouldn’t have touched it."

Ugh.

"S-Shut up. I'm going to share it soon enough with a lady anyway!"

"Yeah, I'll believe it when I see it."

Ugggh.

"Whatever, shut up. More importantly, it’s time to get to work! Get moving, you useless NEET-in-training!"

"You don’t need to yell, you loudmouth lawyer. Even I’ve got nothing going on during the New Year holidays, and my wallet’s feeling pretty light. So this time, I’ll take the job without complaining."

Arguing further was too much of a hassle, so I decided to move the conversation along.

"Do you know a city councilor by the name of Kosuke Akamura?"

"I’ve seen his election posters, at least."

"Good enough. The job this time is basically about him."

I repeated the story I heard from Ebata.

That a city councilor named Akamura was the mastermind behind subcontracting public works. That Akamura was in cahoots with a government official named Sota Aotani and a construction company president named Moegi Rokuda. And that Akamura’s secretary, a young man named Hiroshi Ebata, was planning to expose the whole thing.

That’s why Ebata had come to me, a lawyer, to ask for help as a sort of shield.

"…So that’s the deal. I’m planning to take on this case, but before that, I want you to investigate whether or not there’s enough evidence to believe in this whole subcontracting scheme and to look into this Hiroshi Ebata guy."

"I see. Got it. Should be easy enough. But man, you’re really something, aren’t you? Asking for evidence as if you don’t even trust the whistleblower who came to you for help. I guess it’s true what they say: ‘Trust no one, suspect everyone.’"

"Shut up."

But Kageno wasn’t wrong. I didn’t completely trust Ebata.

I won’t brag, but I’ve made plenty of enemies in my time. Sure, most of them are rotting in prison now, but that doesn’t mean their families wouldn’t try to set me up. And this time, it looks like I

might be sneaking into someone's office to take some documents. If Ebata wanted to, he could easily frame me as an accomplice in theft. I absolutely needed to verify the facts.

January 9th, 4:25 PM

But, the next day.

After reading Kageno's report, I found that my concerns had been unfounded. It seemed that everything Ebata had said was true.

First of all, the construction company 'Atamahane Inc.', led by President Moegi Rokuda, had been winning multiple public works contracts at prices just under the expected bid price. And every single one of those contracts had been subcontracted to another construction company. Of course, to keep things looking legal, they'd officially listed it as partial outsourcing.

As for Hiroshi Ebata, he had a clean record, with no prior convictions. In fact, he had even been commended by the police for catching a purse snatcher. He'd only been working for Akamura since last spring, so it hadn't even been a year yet. It was easy to imagine him deciding to blow the whistle without letting his emotions get in the way.

Granted, this was all circumstantial evidence, but just because it's circumstantial doesn't mean it should be ignored.

And so, I was now set to face off against this smug (probably) city councilor. Handling murder trials is all well and good, but a little variety in my battles could be refreshing. Now, there was no reason left for me to refuse Ebata's request.

"Mr. Zenko, if I'm not mistaken, you have a meeting at 6 PM today, right? You should probably get going soon."

Just as I was finishing up the report, Yukina said this.

"Huh? Oh, but isn't it a bit early? There's still more than an hour left."

"Well… When I passed by the station earlier, they were announcing that the trains had stopped. They might've recovered by now, but just in case…"

"Really? That could be a problem."

Considering the nature of this job, I couldn't afford to be late. Following Yukina's advice, I put down Kageno's report and started getting ready to head out.

Not that there was much to prepare. I just had to throw on my jacket and grab the sleek, shiny black bag that made me look like a big-shot lawyer when I carried it. All it had inside were a notepad and a business card holder.

As I finished getting ready to head out, a thought suddenly crossed my mind, and I turned to Yukina.

Kageno, who had been up all night investigating, didn't have the energy to come to my office, and the brat, whose third semester had just started, hadn't arrived yet. It was the perfect chance.

"By the way, Yukina. Your birthday is the day after tomorrow, right? You're turning twenty."

"Eh? Oh, you remembered!?"

Her face lit up with joy.

"Of course I did. You only turn twenty once in your life. We should celebrate. How about we go out and have something nice to eat?"

"Really!? I'm so happy! I'm really looking forward to it! You're serious, right!?"

Seeing Yukina's face light up with happiness—and the fact that I managed to set up a date—put a spring in my step as I left the office.

…However.

Looking back on it now, her reaction seemed a bit too eager, or maybe it was a little forced.

That's right. Yukina probably sensed it too.

For the past few months, every time I made plans to go on a date with Yukina, something always came up, and the date never actually happened. She probably figured this time wouldn't be any different.

And though I didn't know it at the time, her suspicion would turn out to be correct.

This time, for an exceptional reason…

◆

"…Maybe I came too early."

I muttered while glancing at my watch.

I'd taken Yukina's advice and caught an earlier train, but since the schedule had been restored, I ended up arriving way too early. Even though I was already at the nearest station, I still had about fifteen minutes until the appointed time.

Given the circumstances this time, being late was obviously out of the question, but arriving too early—even by five minutes—wasn't ideal either. If one of Akamura's office workers happened to spot me loitering around on their way home, it could lead to unnecessary trouble. On the other hand, it was too awkwardly timed to stop by a café or fast food joint.

I was considering killing some time by browsing at a convenience store or bookstore when it happened.

It snuck up on me without a sound, an event that seemed harmless at first glance.

"Here you go! We're giving out free samples of the new Ko-Ka Hebusi Blue! Yes, here you go—enjoy! No, I don't mean enjoy life in general, I mean the drink!"

Near the station exit, a group of people were handing out juice samples while shouting some nonsensical lines.

And for some reason, among them was—

"Here you go! Wait—Zenko? What are you doing here?"

…Satsuki.

"Does it matter what I'm doing here? More importantly, what are *you* doing?"

"Isn't it obvious? I'm working a part-time job handing out samples! I need money because a new book of Mao Zedong and Lenin's conversations is coming out soon."

That sounded… strange.

"…Wait a minute. Mao Zedong and Lenin? Weren't they from different time periods? How could they have a conversation?"

"Apparently, they're using two mediums to make it happen."

…Right, okay. But are there really mediums out there who can speak both Chinese and Russian?

"Anyway, that aside, aren't middle schoolers like you not supposed to be doing part-time jobs? Pretty sure that's against school rules."

"It’s none of your business. On paper, I’m helping out a relative, so it’s all good. Besides, if I keep chatting with you, I’ll get scolded. Here, take this and scram."

"..."

She had a point. There was no point in continuing this conversation with the brat. I took the sample and left.

Apparently, it was the blue version of a well-known soda. It seemed ridiculously unhealthy, but according to the promotional material, it used natural coloring and was calorie-free. In this health-obsessed age, they probably wouldn’t put anything too bad in it. Besides, drinking it would kill about five minutes. Luckily, the station was well-heated, and I was starting to feel a bit thirsty. So, with the slightly suspicious can in hand, I headed for a bench inside the station.

But that’s when disaster struck.

In hindsight, I should have seen it coming.

First, the drink was given to me by Satsuki.

Second, it was a sample product that had just been handed out. In other words, it had been shaken around as it was distributed with all that "Here you go, here you go!" business. And it was a can of soda. A warm can of soda.

I opened it. *Pssssshhhhhhhh!*

"Whoa!?"

Blue liquid sprayed everywhere.

I managed to dodge quickly enough to avoid getting my clothes soaked, but my hand was completely dyed blue, looking rather uncomfortably strange.

"Damn it, what the hell is this?"

I hurriedly wiped my hand with a handkerchief.

What a mess. It should’ve been obvious, even to a kid, that this would happen under the circumstances. People around me were staring in curiosity, and to top it all off, Satsuki was laughing at me from across the way. It was a nightmare.

Feeling extremely awkward, I chugged the rest of the Ko-Ka Hebusi Blue without even tasting it and left the station as quickly as I could.

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Looking back—

I really should have washed my hands more thoroughly then. As it turned out, the claim about zero calories was true, and my hands weren't sticky at all, so I figured it was fine to leave it.

I'm only human, after all. I can't blame myself too much for that. But considering I was about to sneak into someone's office to help steal incriminating evidence, I should have taken it as a sign. Especially since it involved Satsuki.

This was absolutely a bad omen. It was like one of those soldiers saying, "If I make it back alive, I'm getting married," right before going off to war.

◆

And so, without properly washing my hands, I headed to the office. I adjusted my pace to make sure I arrived at the right time.

The office turned out to be smack in the middle of a residential area, which was a bit surprising.

It was a detached building, but it looked more like an upgraded prefab shack than an actual house. Outside, there was a banner with "Kosuke Akamura" written on it, giving off the typical election office vibe.

I wasn't sure how to feel about it. Should I be impressed that a mere city councilor could afford an office like this, or should I feel sorry for him that he couldn't afford more than a prefab shack?

It was probably the former. I didn't know exactly how much a city councilor made, but I doubted they earned over 6000 dollars a month. Maintaining a detached office and hiring staff would be out of the question on that salary.

In other words, Ebata was probably right. Akamura was definitely up to something shady.

"Mr. Yamashika, I've been expecting you."

Meeting me at the entrance was Hiroshi Ebata, dressed in his usual suit and tie, just like yesterday.

"Please, come in. As you can see, there's no one else here right now."

"Yeah."

The inside of the office wasn't much different from mine. There were a few desks, phones, computers, and a sofa for receiving guests.

But unlike my office, everything looked brand new and expensive, and the place was bigger, which annoyed me.

"Please, have a seat on the sofa for now. I'll make us some coffee."

"Oh, don't worry about it. This isn't really the time to be taking a coffee break, is it?"

"Actually, I think it's better if we drink some coffee and stay calm. Even if someone were to walk in on us by chance, we can easily play it off as two people just having a casual coffee. Besides, I'd prefer you leave some evidence that you were here, Mr. Yamashika."

"…I see. That does make sense. You're probably right."

"Exactly. Though, this wasn't really my idea."

It was probably something he picked up from reading mystery novels.

In this situation, there was no need to take our time savoring it. What was important was that we maintained the appearance of an office worker and a guest, rather than just looking like thieves. That way, even if someone came in, it would be easy to cover up. It would also serve as proof that I was present at the scene.

Between asking me to back him up and everything else, Ebata seemed like a pretty quick thinker. So, I accepted his offer and sat on the sofa, sipping the coffee he made.

It seemed like some pretty high-end coffee, with an amazing aroma. However, as someone who prefers green tea, I couldn't really tell the difference between good and bad coffee. All I could think was that it tasted strangely bitter. Was coffee always like this? Maybe I should've added some sugar or milk.

"So, Mr. Ebata, let's get to it. Could you explain how you plan to expose this Akamura guy?"

"Sure, no problem. As I mentioned yesterday, Akamura has been skimming money off public works projects and passing the jobs off to other contractors."

"Yeah, I looked into it a bit myself. I only found a couple of circumstantial pieces of evidence, but it does seem to be true."

"Oh, really? Well, that makes things easier. Now, the skimmed money we're talking about is officially recorded as income for a company called 'Atamahane, Inc.' At this point, there's nothing illegal about it.

Here’s where it gets a bit tricky. When Atamahane outsources the construction work to another company, they sell materials along with it. This includes human resources as part of the ‘materials.’ And when they buy those materials, they get the receipts doctored to inflate the costs. So on Atamahane’s books, the revenue from the skimmed money is perfectly offset by the material costs. This is a tactic that lots of companies use—it's simple but incredibly effective. In this way, the large amounts of money skimmed off are turned into slush funds that Akamura can spend as he pleases."

"That’s quite an elaborate scheme."

There was probably a good reason for going through such complicated steps.

You might think it would be easier to just pocket the skimmed money under the guise of political donations, but it’s not that simple. Political donations are regulated by the Political Funds Control Law, which requires the submission of financial reports and imposes restrictions on how the money can be used. It’s only natural they’d go to such lengths to turn it into slush funds.

"I found the doctored receipts and account ledgers that prove they inflated the costs. But that’s not all. I also discovered receipts for when Akamura used those funds to hire escorts and stay in hotels with women other than his wife. All of this is kept in a hidden safe in this office."

"That certainly sounds like solid evidence… but isn’t it a little too perfect? I mean, would a city councilor really leave evidence of his crimes lying around in an office like this?"

"That’s a fair point. But Akamura probably thought he was clever enough that no one would ever find it. Come with me for a moment."

Ebata opened the door to a room in the back of the office.

Inside was an exceptionally luxurious desk set. One look, and it was obvious that this was Akamura’s office.

Ebata walked over to a large wooden bookshelf in the corner of the room. The shelves were packed with books, and there were drawers at the bottom.

Ebata crouched down and gave one of the drawers a firm push. A very firm push.

The drawer slid slightly inward. It was strange to see a drawer that could be pushed in like that. But I didn’t think much of it at the time…

Ebata kept pushing the drawer. Three times, four times, and on the fifth push—

With a soft click, the base of the bookshelf, which had seemed unremarkable until then, opened up.

Inside was a small, portable safe.

"See? Even a thief wouldn't notice this kind of setup."

"That's… quite the elaborate mechanism. Where can you even buy a bookshelf like this?"

"Oh, you have to get a carpenter to modify it for you. Apparently, there are specialists who deal in this kind of thing."

I see. It's definitely the kind of hiding place a villain would love. Honestly, I kind of want one for my office too. Though, with a brat like Satsuki hanging around, she'd probably find it in no time.

"Still, how did you manage to find this? It's not exactly obvious."

"Well, I can't say this too loudly, but…"

As Ebata said this, he pulled out a thick book from the top of the bookshelf.

It wasn't actually a book. Inside the book cover was something else entirely.

It wasn't noticeable when mixed in with the other books, but under the fluorescent light, you could see a small hole in the book cover. What he pulled out was a tiny hidden camera.

"This is it. Thanks to this, I was able to find the safe."

"..."

I was at a loss for words.

He had even set up a hidden camera in his own workplace. Was this guy me?

Ebata pulled the safe out and brought it over to me. It had a combination lock and a padlock attached.

"Can you open it?"

"Yeah, I think so."

With that, Ebata took a small key from his pocket and inserted it into the padlock.

But it didn’t seem to match the lock. No matter how much Ebata struggled with it, it was clear the padlock wasn’t going to open.

"Are you sure that’s the right key?"

"It is, but don’t worry, it’ll open. Just give me a second."

It didn’t look like it would open at all, but Ebata stubbornly kept working the key, even resorting to banging the padlock with his fist.

I stared in disbelief. Yet somehow, the padlock popped open without much fuss.

"Is this… lock-picking?"

"Maybe it is. I looked into it, and apparently, with this type of lock, if you gather about ten different keys, one of them is bound to work."

A city councilor with a hidden safe, and a secretary with lock-picking skills. They might actually make a pretty good team.

Likely having figured out the combination using the hidden camera, Ebata quickly unlocked the combination lock as well.

Finally, the safe was open. I have to admit, there’s something thrilling about opening a safe, even though it’s not mine.

But—disappointingly, there weren’t any stacks of cash, gold bars, or jewels inside. All that was there were bundles of ledgers and receipts. Maybe if we dug around, we’d find some checks or stock certificates.

"Here’s the evidence. We can’t really go through it here, so let’s get out of here for now."

"Yeah… right…"

But then, something strange happened.

"*Yawn*..."

I let out a yawn. From my mouth.

"…S-Sorry."

I felt a little awkward. Given the situation, yawning at a time like this was pretty inexcusable, even for me.

"No, it's fine. You must be busy too, Mr. Yamashika."

"Ah, I appreciate you saying that, but… wait…"

I opened my mouth and let out another big yawn.

Even Ebata couldn’t help but make a grim face.

"Please, Mr. Yamashika. This is a critical moment."

"I know, I know, I get it. But this is strange… I’m sure I slept well last night… Ah, uh… *yawn*…"

The yawning wouldn’t stop. I had never fallen asleep in even the most boring court proceedings, so why now…?

No, something wasn’t right.

I could feel it clearly.

My eyelids suddenly became incredibly heavy, and an overwhelming wave of drowsiness hit me. But it wasn’t just any ordinary sleepiness.

I was tired. Unbelievably tired. No matter how many all-nighters I’d pulled before, I’d never felt this kind of exhaustion.

A desire to close my eyes and lean back on the sofa welled up inside me. Even though I knew this wasn’t the time or place for that.

"W-What’s wrong, Mr. Yamashika? You look like you’re about to collapse."

"…Ah. Something’s… wrong. I’m so sleepy… unbearably sleepy… Hey, that coffee… did it have some kind of sleep-inducing…"

I couldn’t even finish the sentence. And besides, I’d never heard of coffee that could make someone fall asleep.

"That’s impossible! It was just regular coffee! What’s happening, Mr. Yamashika!? M-Mr. Yamashika!?"

I had reached my limit.

The temptation was too sweet to resist. All I had to do was close my eyes and let my body fall. Just that, and I would feel the ultimate pleasure.

I knew this wasn't the time for that. I was in someone else's office, about to take out crucial evidence. I had no time to be sleeping.

But I couldn't hold on any longer.

This wasn't something that could be resisted by willpower alone. There was definitely something in that coffee.

Who did this and for what reason? Could it have been Ebata, trying to trap me somehow…?

But by this point, my mind was no longer capable of thinking clearly.

Even though I kept telling myself I couldn't let this happen, my consciousness became more and more hazy…

And finally, I blacked out.

閑章

Interlude

"It seems like only the lawyer drank the coffee. Nothing much we can do. Let’s move in."

"Y-Yeah, that seems to be the case, but… Mr. Aotani, are you really serious about this?"

"What are you saying now, Mr. Rokuda? We’ve got one of them asleep, haven't we? There's no way we can let an opportunity like this slip by. We should proceed as planned."

"B-But, if we fail—"

"Being cautious is fine, but that depends on the time and the situation. With the two of us, we can definitely get that document. If we miss this opportunity, they’ll run straight to the police for sure."

"…Y-You're probably right, but…"

"Mr. Rokuda! Get a grip! Do you want to go back to that miserable life at the bottom of society!?"

"Al… Alright! Alright, I’ll do it, I’ll do it!"

"Good. Then let's go into the office. When I see an opening, I’ll put him in a chokehold from behind, and you… understand?"

"Y-Yeah, I got it."

"Make sure you don’t act suspiciously. Alright… let’s go."

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"Ugh… It’s freezing…"

Shivering, I woke up.

It was cold. What the hell was this bone-chilling cold? My entire body felt like it had been frozen to the core.

But that was only natural. What I saw in front of me was a bright full moon shining in the sky. And my back prickled because I was lying in the grass.

In other words—I had been sleeping outside. In the middle of January, in this freezing cold.

I could have frozen to death if I wasn't careful. But even stranger, why was I sleeping out here like this? Even if I'd gotten drunk, I wouldn't have been stupid enough to risk my life doing something this reckless…

Damn, I couldn't think straight. Even though I was freezing to death, I felt like I could pass out again if I closed my eyes. If I lost consciousness now, I'd definitely die. I couldn't go out in such a ridiculous way. I had a grown-up date with Yukina in two days, once she turned twenty.

"…Ah."

I remembered.

That's right. I had been meeting with Hiroshi Ebata, who introduced himself as secretary to the city councilor, at his office just a little while ago. Then, all of a sudden, I was hit with an overwhelming drowsiness and lost consciousness.

I had a bad feeling. Had I been set up after all?

…That was the only conclusion I could come to. There was no other reason for him to drug me when I was there to witness him stealing those important documents. His goal might not have been to steal the evidence after all—maybe it was just to frame me for stealing the contents of the safe.

And then, it hit me. How had I not noticed it sooner? I realized I was gripping something in my hand.

What was it? I brought my freezing hand up in front of my face.

It was a knife.

And it was covered in blood. I wanted to commend myself for not immediately screaming when I saw it.

But the fact that I was teetering on the verge of letting out a scream was undeniable. In that moment, my thoughts were clouded by the freezing cold that seemed to penetrate to my core, and whatever drug was still in my system kept me from being able to think clearly.

And then, I felt it—a presence next to me. The moment I turned my gaze in that direction—

"U-Uwaaaaaaaa!?"

I had reached my limit. I let out a scream so pathetic that I embarrassed myself.

But who wouldn't be freaked out?

I woke up outside, with a blood-stained knife in my hand.

And to make matters worse, right next to me was a dead body that wasn't moving at all.

And that body—was Hiroshi Ebata, the man I had just been talking to.

Ebata's abdomen was soaked in blood. There were no signs of breathing, no hint that his heart was beating—nothing.

…But wait. It was dangerous to assume he was dead just based on appearances. I hurriedly placed my fingers on Ebata's neck to check for a pulse.

The air was freezing, which might have been part of it, but his skin felt ice-cold. And—there was no pulse.

At that moment—

"What's going on, kid?"

It must have been because of the pathetic scream I let out earlier. A man I didn't recognize emerged from the bushes.

And, to my surprise, he wasn't alone. One after another, more men appeared. They looked to be in their twenties or thirties. What were these guys doing here, in the middle of the night, in a freezing field?

I then noticed the sound of water flowing nearby. Glancing around, I realized there was a large river just ahead. It seemed we were in some sort of grassy area, but considering the river, calling it a riverside was more appropriate. And as for large rivers in my hometown, the only one that came to mind was the Tsura River. It was an enormous river, big enough to have baseball fields and golf courses along its banks.

"Aaaaah! Y-You don't mean—!"

One of the men suddenly shouted in surprise, pointing at me. Or, to be more specific, at the blood-soaked knife in my hand.

And right beside me, the dead body of a man.

It didn’t take a genius to figure out what they were thinking.

"N-No! It wasn’t me, I didn’t do it—"

I understood why they would suspect me. I really did. But still, I blurted out such a low-level excuse. Even though I knew from experience that nothing I said would matter in this situation. But humans are strange creatures—no matter how hopeless the situation, they feel compelled to deny it, just to ease their own mind.

"I get it, kid. But, you know…"

"Yeah. The world isn’t kind."

"But killing someone… that’s crossing the line, isn’t it? Were you planning to die together or something?"

The men surrounding me started to say strange things, as if they were trying to sympathize with me.

What the hell were they talking about? They understood how I felt? Dying together? What were they even suggesting?

"Look, kid. We feel bad for you, but we saw what we saw. We’ve gotta report this to the police…"

"Still, even if we’re calling the cops, maybe we could give him a little time to run away?"

"No, that’s not right. What’s done is done. No matter the circumstances, he needs to pay for his crime."

An odd argument broke out among the men.

They were talking about letting me escape? Who were these people? In what kind of world would random strangers help a murder suspect escape?

In any case, I knew all too well, thanks to my profession, that with this many witnesses, trying to run would only send me deeper into hell. As tempting as their offer was, I had to refuse.

"L-Look, just listen to me, guys. I get that you might not believe me, but I didn’t kill him. But still, I agree we should call the police."

Pathetic. My voice was trembling. I wanted to believe it was because of the cold, not because I was shaking from fear.

But was this really the right decision? If the police showed up, I'd definitely be taken in. Wasn't there something I should be doing before they called the cops?

Why had Ebata been killed, and why was the murder weapon in my hand?

I needed to think about that as soon as possible. But the cold and the fog in my head made it impossible to focus.

Someone must have called the police, because not long after, I heard that stupid "woo-woo" siren blaring in the distance.

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"Wow, this one's a real mess."

The uniformed officer grimaced as he looked down at Ebata, lying in a pool of blood from his abdomen.

First, the officer checked Ebata's pulse and breathing, confirmed he was clearly dead, and then turned to me, still unable to let go of the knife.

"Did you do this?"

"If I said no, would you believe me?"

"Then let me ask you this—do you have any proof that you *didn't* do it, given the circumstances?"

Ugh. I had no comeback.

When I couldn't say anything, the officer next turned to the onlookers who were gathering around.

"Alright, citizens, I need you all to step back. We have to preserve the crime scene."

Then, taking the receiver attached to his belt, he spoke into it.

"Uh, dispatch? We've got a homicide here. 119. Requesting immediate deployment of detectives and the mobile forensic team. Location is about 300 meters south of the third bridge over the Tsura River, on the east side of the riverbank."

It was probably by the book, but he carried out his duties briskly and efficiently. For me, though, this was a bad turn of events. Thinking ahead to the trial that might come, I would have preferred if they had botched the initial investigation.

"Uh, so, that knife you're holding—can I have you hand it over?"

"..."

I couldn't find any reason to refuse.

After all, it was covered in blood. Logically, it would be considered evidence of a crime, and I couldn't argue against them confiscating it. It wasn't even mine, and just holding it made me guilty of violating weapons laws.

In the end, I had no choice but to hand over the knife. The officer took it carefully, wearing gloves.

"Thanks. And, considering the situation, I'd really appreciate it if you could come down to the station with me for a little chat."

"As far as I know, I don't have any legal obligation to comply with a voluntary escort, do I?"

"Wow, you really know your stuff, Mr. Yamashika."

"...!"

I gasped at the unexpected blow.

"…Since when did you know?"

"From the beginning. From the moment we met. I mean, I don't think there's a single cop who doesn't recognize your face by now. And, as a lawyer, I'm sure you know this, but even though you can refuse a voluntary escort, given the situation—sitting next to a corpse with a blood-stained knife in your hand—I can't just let you go without asking a few questions first."

What an obnoxious cop. He was far more difficult to deal with than that young detective I knew, Haneda.

According to Article 2, Clause 1 of the Japanese Police Duties Execution Act, a police officer may stop and question someone if they have reasonable grounds to suspect that the person has committed, is committing, or is about to commit a crime, based on unusual behavior or other surrounding circumstances. This is commonly known as a "stop and search."

And according to Article 2, Clause 2, if asking questions on the spot is deemed inconvenient for the individual or obstructive to traffic, the officer may request that the person accompany them to a nearby police station, police box, or other similar location for questioning.

In practice, when the police ask you to come with them voluntarily, refusing is almost impossible. Even if you try to argue, they hit you with the killer line, "You haven't done anything wrong, have you? Then there's no reason to refuse, right?" If you continue to refuse, they'll testify in court, saying, "This man didn't even try to explain himself." Or they might obstruct your path, and if you so much as try to push them aside, they'll immediately slap you with a charge of "obstruction of official duties" and take you into custody by force. It's a classic police tactic.

The police could technically arrest me on the spot under the pretext of a "quasi-flagrante delicto" arrest, but that's rarely used, as it can be seen as abuse of power. They'd rather haul you in through a "voluntary" escort. Though, at this point, it's not voluntary at all—it's forced.

"…Just let me confirm one thing."

"Hm? What's that?"

"At least show me your badge."

I had a faint hope. Even police officers can occasionally be dumb enough to forget their badge. If they can't prove they're a cop, they can't officially request a voluntary escort, let alone properly secure the crime scene. Either way, it would be useful to bring up later as a flaw in the investigation.

"Hm. Sure, no problem."

But my hopes were quickly dashed. The officer promptly pulled out his badge and showed it to me.

In reality, I didn't expect him to be that incompetent. I just wanted to know.

I wanted to know the name of the man who had gotten me into this mess—Kunio Iwayanagi.

Kunio Iwayanagi, huh? Quite a respectable name. I'll remember it in case we meet again someday.

"Satisfied? Now, could you please get in the patrol car?"

There was no longer any reason to refuse.

Honestly, it was freezing cold out here, and I still hadn't shaken off the lingering fatigue in my head. If I stayed here any longer answering questions, I had no idea what kind of mistake I might make. On top of that, the patrol car's red lights were already drawing more and more onlookers. Staying here would only make things more uncomfortable.

"…Alright. I'll agree to the voluntary escort. But—"

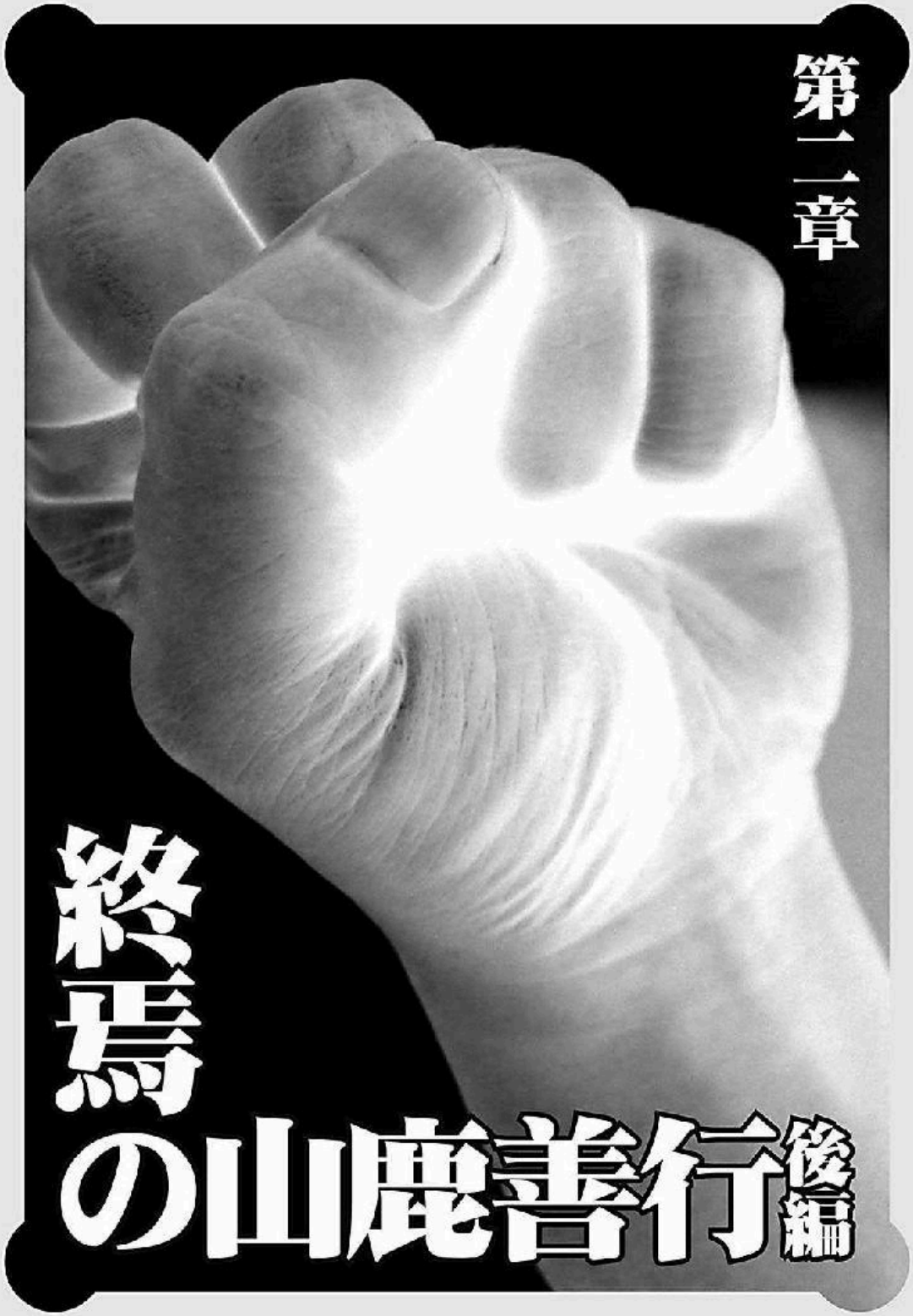
"Hm? What is it?"

I never thought the day would come when I'd say this.

"I'd like to call my lawyer."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it. No problem. But you can talk to the detectives about that when we get to the station, okay?"

…What a tough cop.


第二章
終焉の山鹿善行後編

Chapter 2: Zenko Yamashika’s Demise (Part 2)

January 9th, 11:12 PM, Police Station

I was thrown into the interrogation room at the police station and ended up waiting for nearly three hours.

I miscalculated. I was getting more and more irritated, waiting for the interrogation to start, but in the end, it took three hours before two detectives finally appeared in front of me. Damn, if it was just a voluntary escort, the police had no right to hold me, so I should’ve just gone home.

But if I had left, the police might’ve announced that I had fled. Besides, it wasn’t all bad. I managed to get a nearby officer to buy me a hot drink with my own money. Thanks to that, I warmed up a bit, and the lingering fatigue in my head had mostly cleared.

I was probably about to go head-to-head with these detectives. Considering how irritated I was from the long wait, having my head clear now would work in my favor.

And then, three hours later. A little after 11 PM.

"Hahaha, you scamming lawyer! You’ve finally shown your true colors! I’ve been waiting for this day for so long!"

The young detective, Haneda, barely in his twenties, laughed gleefully, pointing at me.

"…Wait, you’re still a detective?"

"W-What did you say!?"

"I mean, I hadn’t seen your ugly mug around lately, so I thought you’d finally been demoted somewhere. I'm serious."

"You jerk…!"

Still the same old, incompetent detective. Compared to that uniformed officer, Kunio Iwayanagi, who brought me in, this guy was a hundred times easier to deal with.

But unfortunately for me, it wasn’t just this young detective who showed up in front of me.

"Haneda. Shut up and just take the statement. I’ll handle the questioning."

The one who said that was Haneda’s partner, and looked for all the world like a gangster—Detective Inaba.

Or so I thought.

…Most of the veteran detectives I knew all looked like thugs, rough and tough. But this guy was one of the rare exceptions. He looked more like a slightly bulky salaryman. The only thing he had in common with the other detectives was his messy hair and wrinkled shirt.

However, unlike someone like Detective Inaba, this guy gave off an air of authority. The way Haneda shrank in fear was even more pronounced than when dealing with Inaba.

"Hey. Who the hell are you?"

"What did you just say? You don't know who I am?"

"Do you remember the shape of every pebble lying on the side of the road?"

The detective's nose twitched.

"You've got some nerve, don't you? Fine, remember this—I'm Yutoku Endai, Chief of the Criminal Investigation Division."

Wow. What a grandiose, pretentious name. And the chief of the Criminal Investigation Division, no less? Of course I wouldn't know him, I've never met him. Sure, I've been to the police station plenty of times, and maybe we've crossed paths once or twice, but there's no way I'd remember some random pebble on the side of the road.

"I see, so the chief himself is coming out. Is it because I, the enemy of the Japanese police, am suspected of murder, and you wanted to get the glory for yourself?"

"Don't be ridiculous! It's just that, facing a slippery guy like you, I decided to take extra precautions and handle this personally."

Gotcha. This guy's easy to deal with.

There are two kinds of people who become division chiefs. One type works their way up from being a detective, and the other is the so-called "career officer."

This guy's probably one of the latter. And without a doubt, he's planning to bag a big fish like me to make a name for himself. Otherwise, there's no reason for a high-ranking officer like him to bother interrogating someone who isn't even officially a suspect yet.

This works in my favor. People driven by greed are easy to manipulate.

"But still, Mr. Yamashika," said the ostentatious Chief Endai, puffing himself up, "I never thought the day would come when I'd be interrogating you. You won't believe it, but I actually respected you in my own way."

"Who would believe that, you idiot."

"..."

Chief Endai's temple twitched.

Depending on how he responded, I could get a better sense of his character, but in the end, it seemed like he decided to pretend he hadn't heard my words and push forward with the conversation.

"…It's true, I've never liked your methods—destroying and falsifying evidence. But even so, it's a fact that you've defended innocent clients and found the real perpetrators."

"Thanks for that. But, Chief Endai, there are a couple of things you'll need to correct about what you just said."

"Correct? What do you mean?"

"First, I've never tampered with evidence. Second, I've never falsified evidence. I've only taken the necessary steps to protect my client's rights. Now, if you don't correct yourself immediately, I'll sue you for defamation, you damn lapdog of the state."

"…Enough of this."

Though Chief Endai's expression didn't change, his voice became noticeably sharper, betraying the anger boiling beneath the surface.

"Enough pointless banter. Let's get straight to the point. Zenko Yamashika, did you stab Hiroshi Ebata to death?"

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm not saying a word until I talk to my lawyer."

"Don't screw with us!" The predictable interruption came from Haneda, of course. "You're a lawyer yourself! Why the hell do you need to consult another lawyer now!?"

"Listen here, kid, don't get it twisted. The law guarantees every suspect the right to consult with a lawyer. It doesn't matter if I'm a lawyer myself or not. And since you're a servant of the state, you don't have the right to infringe on that. Burn that into your underdeveloped brain."

"You jerk—!"

"Now, now, Haneda. I told you to leave this to me, didn't I?"

Chief Endai cut in quietly. Despite being older, he managed to stay calmer than Haneda. How long that would last, I didn't know.

"Listen, Yamashika. If you want to remain silent, that's your choice. But you realize that by doing so, it's as good as admitting to the crime, right? If you're truly innocent, why not at least offer some explanation before calling in a lawyer? And another thing—you haven't been arrested. You came here voluntarily. You know you don't have the right to demand a lawyer at this stage, correct?"

"Allow me to clarify, Chief Endai. Let's not debate here whether I have the right to consult a lawyer during voluntary questioning. In any case, I'm not staying silent because I'm admitting to anything. I'm staying silent because I hate the police. And one more thing—since, as you said, this is voluntary questioning, I can leave whenever I want, and you can't say a damn thing about it. The police don't have the authority to hold someone without a warrant. You know that, right? So, if you're going to keep wasting my time, I'll be heading out now."

"…You're right about that. But you won't be leaving just yet. You're under reasonable suspicion of having committed murder. Given the circumstances, no one will say we're abusing our authority by holding you until you can prove your innocence."

"Tch. You talk a big game."

In principle, voluntary questioning means you can leave whenever you want. But the troublesome reality is that, just like voluntary escorts are effectively forced, voluntary questioning is essentially the same as being under arrest.

There was a case like this once.

An ordinary person, brought to the police station under voluntary escort, tried to leave of their own will during questioning. Of course, the police had no right to stop them. After all, there's no right to detain someone during voluntary questioning.

However, the detective conducting the interrogation stood in front of the exit and said, "Hold on a second."

In response, the person tried to push the detective aside. Anyone would do the same if blocked from leaving. But the moment they laid a hand on the detective's shoulder, they were arrested and detained for obstructing official duties.

Later, a lawsuit was filed, claiming it was an unlawful arrest. The detective insisted that they were merely standing there, but it was clear they had unlawfully obstructed the defendant from leaving. However, in the first trial, the ruling was that the defendant was at fault.

Whether voluntary or not, interrogations always take place in the confined space known as a police station. As a result, a gray area, virtually black, has emerged in practice. No matter how much one complains, it's almost certain that obstruction of official duties will be applied.

But when the person involved is a lawyer, things are different.

"Fine, if that's how you want to play it, I'll do what I have to. Shall I start by filing a habeas corpus petition?"

Habeas Corpus Act, Article 2. A person whose physical freedom is being unlawfully restrained can request relief under the provisions of this law.

This is mostly used in cases where, for example, a divorced parent unlawfully takes a child away, but it can also serve as a legal basis against wrongful detention. And legal bases are what matter most to me.

"Go ahead and try," Endai said, showing no signs of backing down. "With the victim's blood and your fingerprints on the knife, and witnesses saying you were next to the body, I doubt any court would grant you immediate release."

"Unfortunately for you, none of that is direct evidence that I killed the victim. And judges are even more concerned with legal formalities than we lawyers are. Don't assume they'll side with you. Either way, once I file the habeas corpus petition, you'll have two choices: either bring me an arrest warrant or let me go."

"...Very well. There will be no release. The first step toward your arrest begins now. I no longer expect a confession from you. First, we'll need you to provide a blood sample for comparison."

"Hah, do you really think I'm just going to nod and say, 'Fine, I understand'?"

"I don't expect you to. That's why I've already prepared this."

Endai shoved a piece of paper in front of me. On it was written:

"Submit your blood without any fuss. Refuse, and you'll be bleeding."

Damn it, it was a court-issued warrant. Since when did the courts get such a foul mouth?

Anyway, there's nothing I can do when a court order is involved. Resigned, I offered my arm, and at Endai's signal, Detective Haneda brought in another official. Probably some sort of medical officer authorized to perform blood draws, given how swiftly they prepared the syringe.

I braced myself, thinking that if they missed the vein even once, I'd punch them in the name of legitimate self-defense—but they were clearly wary of being given any excuse for a lawsuit. Unlike some hack doctors I've known, this person smoothly inserted the needle with such precision that it reminded me of a mosquito, quickly drawing my blood without any hesitation.

"Just wait. Once the blood test results are in, you won't be able to make any excuses. No judge will raise any objections to keeping you detained in the meantime."

Endai's voice brimmed with confidence. As much as it pissed me off, there wasn't much to argue with in his logic.

Still, how important could my blood really be? As far as I could recall, I hadn't done anything incriminating that would be revealed by a blood test.

Then again, I had been knocked out for a while. It wouldn't be surprising if they'd done something to frame me while I was unconscious. There could be something in my blood that would serve as a breakthrough for them. After all, if that weren't the case, the court wouldn't have issued a warrant.

It seemed the situation was turning significantly against me.

And then, barely an hour after my blood was drawn. The date had changed. It was now Thursday, January 10th, 12:05 AM.

I thought I was prepared for this.

After all, when I woke up, there I was—holding a blood-stained kitchen knife in my right hand, a corpse lying just beyond my left.

And several men witnessed the scene, reporting it immediately. Honestly, it wouldn't have been surprising if I'd been arrested on the spot.

But even so.

When they thrust that arrest warrant for murder with my name on it right in front of my face, even I found it a bit hard to keep my cool.

I've never wanted to punch Detective Haneda's smug, grinning face more than I did at that moment.

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By now, I hoped there was a huge commotion happening outside the walls.

The undefeated lawyer who had won case after case in criminal courts had just been arrested for murder. It was nothing short of a joke. There must have been breaking news by now. Surely not just on TV Tokyo, but on other networks too. It would piss me off if the story was ignored completely.

Then again, if there was a news flash, that would piss me off too. No doubt some socially inept detective wannabe or some Communist middle schooler somewhere would be laughing their ass off. And probably some people at the prosecutor's office too.

Well, maybe there was a silver lining. Maybe Yukina would be worried about me, and our relationship would suddenly take a big step forward—that kind of twist could happen, so it wouldn't all be bad.

…Wait a minute.

Suddenly, I remembered something terrifying.

There's no way I can make it to Yukina's birthday now…!

When the police arrest a suspect, they have to either release them or send them to the prosecutor's office within 48 hours. In other words, once I'm arrested, they can hold me for 48 hours easily. With someone as skilled as me as their opponent, they probably won't detain me for the full limit, but the police would still want to keep me locked up as long as possible. The chance of being released by tomorrow… is slim at best. And even after the police finish their questioning, I'll be sent to the prosecutor's office, where I'll face another 24 hours of interrogation. After that, if the court approves, they can detain me for up to 20 more days.

So now I've missed both Christmas and Yukina's birthday—two major events. Well, this time, the circumstances are what they are. I just have to trust that Yukina will understand, since I've been arrested. I want to believe that. I *need* to believe that.

But if this is what happens just from making a simple date promise, I can't help but think that if I ever propose, the world might just come to an end.

"Well then, first I'd like to ask you something, Zenko Yamashika," said Chief Detective Endai, forcing me to switch gears. "No, I should call you 'Suspect Yamashika' now, shouldn't I? I assume you plan to exercise your right to remain silent?"

Unfortunately, I'm no longer in a situation where I can think about dates and such. I've been arrested. As the perpetrator of a murder case.

Needless to say, I'm in a bind. The biggest bind of my life, in fact. At worst, I could lose my license to practice law and spend the next ten years eating prison food. As much as I want to take care of Yukina, I can't afford to think about anyone but myself right now. I need a plan. I need to figure out a plan.

"What's the matter, Suspect Yamashika? Where's all that spirit you had a moment ago?"

"Don't worry about it. I was just thinking. Besides, you don't need my confession at this point, do you? After all, you've gathered enough evidence to request an arrest warrant already."

"That's right. The evidence is more than sufficient. You won't be able to talk your way out of this. Your lawyer's license will be revoked, and all the judges you've made cry will finally breathe a sigh of relief."

"Fine, do whatever you want. But now that you've arrested and detained me, I'd like to see the basis for it. I have that right, don't I?"

"You should already know without me saying it. We've already determined that the crime scene was the office of Hiroshi Ebata, the victim, who worked as a city councilor in Akamura. We also have proof that you were there."

So that's the angle the police are taking. It's true, I woke up by the river, but I guess it's not necessary to assume Ebata was killed there.

…And then I remembered drinking coffee in the office of the Akamura city councilor. Internally, I clicked my tongue. So the blood sample was for DNA testing. No, normally they'd take saliva, not blood… Was it just to mess with me? That's not impossible, which makes it even scarier.

"And then there's the fact that you were holding a bloodstained knife believed to be the murder weapon. Your fingerprints were the only ones found on it. Don't you think that's more than enough to justify your arrest?"

Logically speaking, with that much evidence, they'd certainly have enough to request an arrest warrant.

"So what's the motive? What reason would I have to kill Ebata?"

"Well, you can look forward to finding that out in court. I've already told you that we have sufficient grounds to arrest you. Meanwhile, you've said you don't plan to confess. In that case, we have no further information to provide."

“…Is that so.”

Damn it. Without any information, I can’t make a move. But I also know from experience that a clumsy confession will only dig my own grave. I’m completely stuck.

Chief Detective Endai stood up.

“Well then. Let’s call it a day. You must be tired; we’ve prepared a place for you to sleep. Take your time cooling off in the detention center. As soon as we’ve confirmed a couple more things, we’ll send you off to the prosecutor’s office. You can look forward to it—the prosecutor handling your case is *that person*.”

“…What?”

At that moment, I had a terrible, sinking feeling.

“That person? You… you don’t mean that Togasaki hyena, do you?”

“Exactly. Prosecutor Togasaki. As soon as he heard you were a murder suspect, he rushed over from Tokyo. You can look forward to the trial.”

Damn it. This is bad. Of all people, why does it have to be him? No, maybe it’s *because* it’s me that he’s involved.

Knowing Togasaki, he probably did a little dance of joy the moment he heard I’d been arrested. But the thought of him interrogating me so thoroughly sends chills down my spine. In court, we’d at least be on equal footing, but as a suspect, I’m at a disadvantage. Togasaki will outrank me, and I’ll be beneath him. It’s utterly horrifying.

I’ll have to come up with a strategy or two. Nothing will work directly on Togasaki himself, but if I prepare something beforehand, even he will have to play catch-up.

“…Fine, do what you want. But before that, I’m going to exercise my rights. Let me call the bar association. Now that I’ve been arrested, you can’t complain about that, can you?”

“Very well, do as you like.”

Chief Detective Endai signaled to Haneda, who brought a black telephone and placed it in front of me.

At least they seemed to understand that now that I’ve been arrested, obstructing me further would be illegal.

“Well then, could you leave? Or are you planning to eavesdrop on the conversation between a suspect and their lawyer?”

“Hmph. We’ve lost interest in anything you have to say. We’ll leave. But know that we’re monitoring where you call, so be careful.”

“How considerate.”

Do they really think I’m going to instruct someone to destroy evidence over the phone? As if I’d do something that stupid.

Once I confirmed the two had left, I dialed the local bar association’s number from memory.

Now then.

When police arrest a suspect, they must either release them or send them to the prosecutor’s office within 48 hours. And the prosecutor must decide within 24 hours whether to indict or drop the charges.

In most serious cases—like murder—police usually discuss the arrest with the prosecutor in advance. Especially if the suspect happens to be someone familiar with the law. In other words, the decision to indict me had likely already been made the moment I was arrested.

On the other hand, once a person is arrested and labeled a “suspect,” they have the right to request a lawyer. That’s why the police, reluctant to allow any contact with a lawyer before an arrest, will usually allow it freely afterward. Because in this country, just being arrested comes with a stigma of guilt, even before the trial’s verdict. The bizarre conviction rate of 99% backs that up. The police likely believe that once someone is arrested, everything else will fall into place.

But—there’s a loophole here.

For instance, what if the suspect exercises their right to meet with a lawyer, but the police ignore this request for days?

It would be an obvious human rights violation.

“Yes, this is the Bar Association.”

The call connected. Normally, at this time of night, I’d expect a voicemail response, but… could this be because of me?

“This is Yamashika, the lawyer.”

“W-W-Whaaat!? Y-Yamashika, the lawyer!? *That* lawyer Yamashika!?”

The tone on the other end of the line shifted dramatically.

Well, I *was* just arrested for murder. It’s no surprise the people at the Bar Association already know.

“Yeah, that Yamashika. Is your vice-chairman available?”

“Y-Yes! Please, please hold on a moment!”

Soon enough, a familiar greeting came through the receiver.

'You piece of shit, you disgrace to the legal profession.'

“…”

Starting with that, huh? Well, I’m used to it by now.

“…Glad to see you’re as lively as ever.”

'Shut the hell up. I figured you’d call sooner or later after I heard about your arrest… What, do you want me to offer my condolences? You walking sack of garbage, I’ve never heard of a lawyer being arrested for murder. And to think that lawyer is a member of *our* Bar Association. You don’t even deserve to be judged by a jury. I’d kill you myself if I could.'

“Damn it, this conversation’s going nowhere. I’m sure you’ve got things you want to say, but shut up for a second.”

'You shut up. I can already guess why you’re calling. You want me to send a lawyer, don’t you?'

“No, that’s not it. I’m going to represent myself. So there’s no need to send any lawyer. That’s what I wanted to say.”

'…What?'

Even Takeda sounded surprised.

“There’s nothing illegal about it, right? A suspect has the right to call a lawyer, but a right isn’t an obligation. I don’t have to exercise it if I don’t want to. So understand this, not a single person, absolutely no one, is to send a lawyer here.”

'…Hmph. Good for you, Zenko Yamashika. Clean up your own mess.'

The call abruptly ended.

With that, one part of my plan was complete. The next part would be executed when I was transferred to the prosecutor's office.

Heh heh heh, just you wait, Togasaki. I'm going to wipe that smug look off your face.

◆

The next day, nothing happened.

I was taken out of detention and interrogated by a detective other than Endai. However, they probably already knew I wasn't going to answer their questions anymore. Maybe they were afraid of being accused of illegal interrogation later because the time spent in silence far exceeded the actual questioning. It was boring as hell, though.

Chief Detective Endai reappeared the day after that. It was the day I had plans to go on a date with Yukina.

"Well, Yamashika. You'll be pleased to hear this. Our investigation to corroborate the evidence is nearly complete as of yesterday. Today, you're going to be transferred to the prosecutor's office. Enjoy your one-on-one time with Prosecutor Togasaki."

Just thinking about it sent a shiver down my spine.

"Is that so? When am I being sent?"

"Right now. You'll be interrogated at the prosecutor's office until the evening."

"I see. Then it's time for me to make my next move."

I grinned.

Time to execute the second part of my strategy, following the lawyer-refusal tactic: Operation Fight Club.

"Hey, Chief Detective. Have you ever seen the movie *Fight Club*?"

"…Huh? What the hell is that?"

He didn't say yes or no. He just looked at me like I was spouting nonsense.

“I see, you haven’t seen it. That’s a shame. Even a detective should take in a bit more culture. If you had, you might’ve been able to predict what’s coming.”

I grinned again.

Then, making sure he could see me, I lightly clenched my fist and wound up to throw a punch.

“Y-You bastard!?”

Instinctively, Endai raised his hands to shield his face.

But I ignored him and threw the punch with all my might.

At my own cheek.

“Ugh!”

With a dull thud, my body couldn’t hold itself up, and I tumbled out of my chair, crashing to the floor with a loud *bang*.

I had expected it, but damn, it hurt more than I thought.

“What the… Yamashika! Have you lost your mind!?”

Clearly not expecting this turn of events, Chief Detective Endai shouted, unable to hide his shock.

“Not really. It’s all part of the plan.”

I placed both hands on the desk to support myself as I stood up.

Looking at the corner of the desk like this, the edge seemed awfully sharp. I hesitated for a second. If I screwed this up, I could seriously die.

But it had to be done. A man’s gotta have guts. I raised my head high and then—

“Hyah!”

I slammed my forehead into the corner of the desk.

“Gaaaahhhhh!”

I should’ve never done that…!

I immediately regretted it. My forehead felt like it was on fire, as if I’d pressed a scorching hot iron against it, and it wasn’t an exaggeration to say I literally saw sparks. As expected, my skin had split open, and red drops began to drip down.

Maybe my brain shook from the impact, because I felt dizzy. But it wasn’t enough. The bleeding and bruises weren’t sufficient yet.

In front of the two detectives, who were now staring at me in shock, I clawed at my own arms with my nails, scratching deep. Needless to say, it hurt like hell.

Then, with blood oozing from my arms, I swung and started punching myself in the face. Right, left, right, left. With each hit, my vision warped, and my cheekbones screamed in agony.

“Damn it, stop, Yamashika! Haneda, restrain him!”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

Chief Detective Endai snapped out of it and grabbed me from behind, locking my arms.

But it was too late. I’d hit myself enough that in a short while, my face would be swollen bright red.

Still, there wasn’t enough blood. The amount from my forehead wasn’t much, and the scratches on my arms weren’t deep enough. Not enough to make a real spectacle.

I’d gotten into more than my share of fights in my younger days. I knew from experience where to hit to make my nose bleed.

Even though Endai and Haneda were restraining me, I managed to free my right hand, formed a fist, and punched my nose as hard as I could.

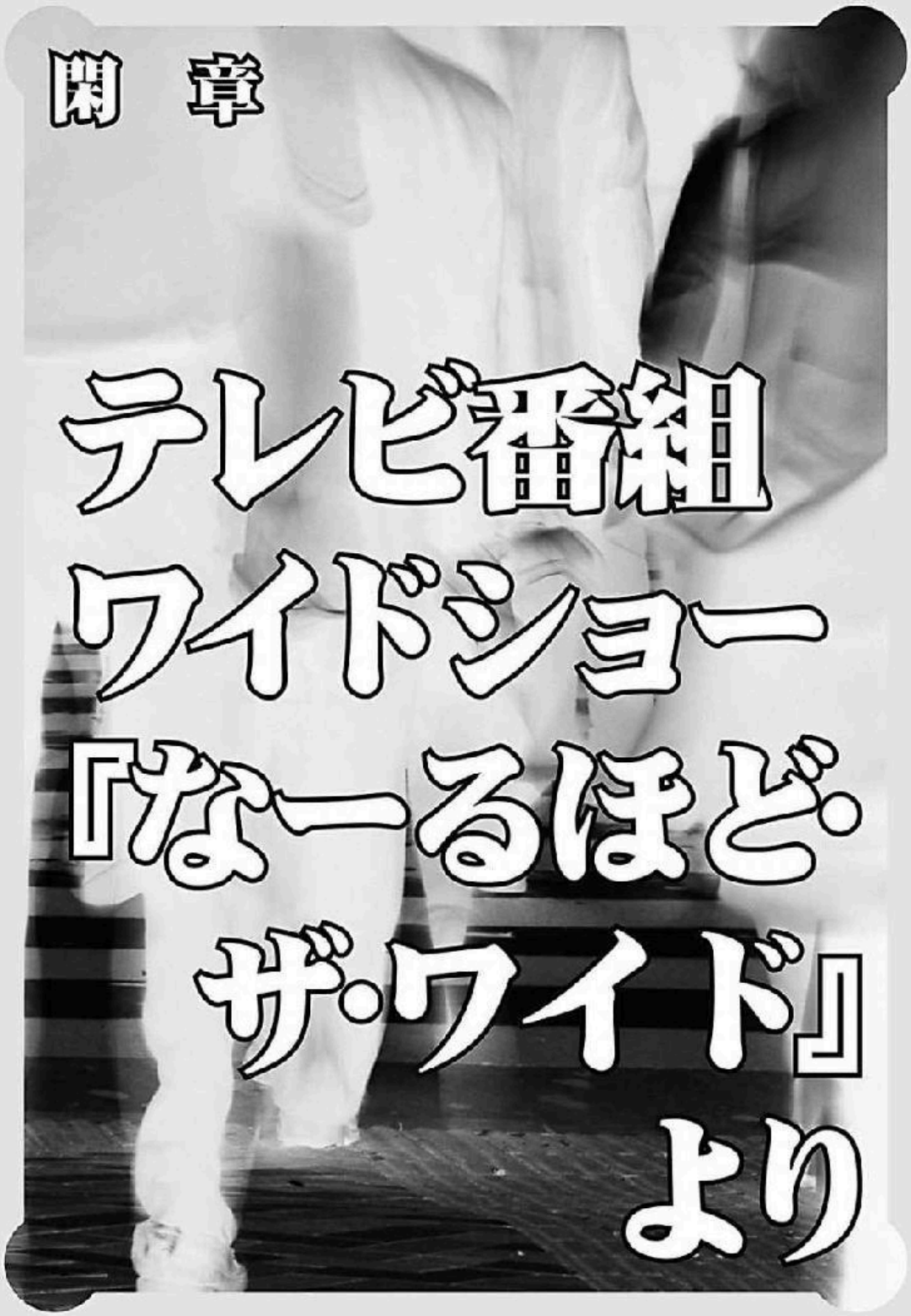
“Agh!”

A sharp pain shot through me. The nose is brutal. Tears welled up naturally, and it felt like a needle had been stuck deep into my brain.

Soon enough, I felt something warm surge up from deep inside my nose, and red liquid began to pour out.

The red blood drenched my face and, still not satisfied, began soaking into my white shirt.

With this, the preparations for Operation Fight Club were complete.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Interlude: TV Program "Recovery Channel"

‘Now then, we’ll continue with the news concerning the arrest of Attorney Yamashika—what? Oh, it seems there’s some movement at the police station. It looks like Attorney Yamashika is about to be transferred to the prosecutor’s office. Let’s go to Ono on the scene. Ono?’

‘Yes, I’m here in front of the police station where Attorney Yamashika is being held. Just now, there’s been a sudden flurry of activity at the station’s entrance. According to information, Attorney Yamashika is about to leave—ah! Here he comes! He’s coming out now! He’s flanked by two officers; the man in the middle appears to be Attorney Yamashika! His face, arms—no, his whole body is covered with a jumper, but it seems that’s him!

He’s just stepped out of the entrance… and now he’s being put into a car—wait! Attorney Yamashika is suddenly struggling! It’s intense; he’s shaking off the two officers and trying to pull off the jumper covering his face—oh no!? What just happened!? Attorney Yamashika’s face is covered in bruises, as if he’s been beaten! It looks like he’s bleeding as well; his white shirt is completely stained red with blood! Ah, Attorney Yamashika is shouting something in our direction! Let’s try to listen!’

‘—I hereby accuse them! These officers here attempted to force a confession from me using torture, a method prohibited by the Constitution!’

‘What are you doing? Restrain him!’

‘I declare this! I am innocent, and this arrest is nothing more than an arbitrary investigation by a police force that’s been humiliated by me time and time again!’

‘Don’t let him speak any further! Get him in the car, now!’

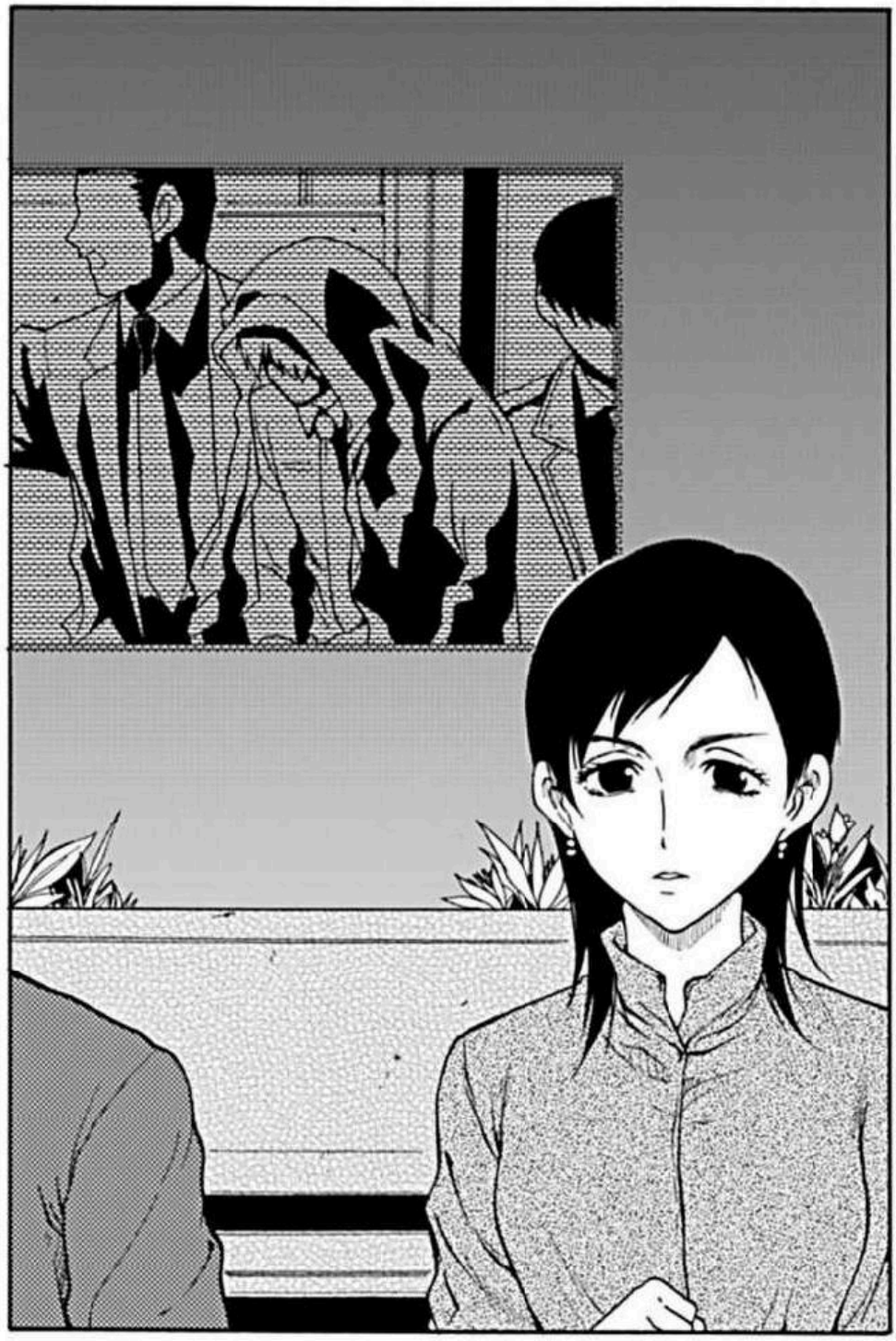
‘Alright, it’s done, move out!’

‘Damn it, let go of me, you violent cops!’

‘Ah! Attorney Yamashika has been put into the car… and now they’re leaving the station! This is turning into a big situation! The scene is in complete chaos! …What? Ah, yes, let’s return to the studio for now. This was Ono, reporting from the scene!’

‘…That was Ono. Now, turning to our analyst Kumugi. Things are escalating, aren’t they?’

‘Yes, I’m surprised. It’s true that Attorney Yamashika has embarrassed the police numerous times in the past… But using violence during the interrogation is preposterous. This issue will definitely be brought up in the upcoming trial, and the police will be forced into a corner.’



‘Yes, all eyes will be on how things develop from here.

…Now, for the next story. Last year, Tama-chan the seal, who was officially registered as a resident of Tamagawa, somehow announced its candidacy for the city’s mayoral election, shocking everyone. If elected, it would become the first seal mayor in human history, and so has been affectionately dubbed “Seal Mayor”—’

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“…Phew.”

I let out a breath inside the car, sandwiched between two detectives with stern faces.

Maybe I overdid it a bit; I was out of breath. I’d already been stuck in the insane environment of a detention center, with barely any decent food or exercise. Sudden exertion really takes a toll on you. Plus, I was bleeding.

“Hey, Chief Detective Endai. What did you think of my little speech earlier? Personally, I think it was quite the passionate performance. Oh, and how about we make a bet? How many news stations do you think will report ‘Doubts arise over police investigation’ today? I’m betting all six will run it. What do you think, Detective Endai?”

“Shut up, you con artist!”

Scary, scary. Looks like he’s in a bad mood. I was tired too, so I decided to keep quiet for now.

The prosecutor’s interrogation room wasn’t much different from the one at the police station. The only real difference was that the person doing the questioning was a prosecutor instead of a cop.

“I always knew this day would come, though I didn’t think it would be so soon.”

That was the first line from the Hyena Prosecutor Togasaki, who had come all the way from his post in Tokyo.

“You’re still at it, huh? Rushing here from Tokyo just to snatch someone else’s work as soon as you heard I was arrested? How many times has it been now? Honestly. I hope you’re not completely isolated over there at the prosecutor’s office.”

“Fortunately, there aren’t many prosecutors eager to make enemies with you. When I say I want to take the case, every department is more than happy to cooperate.”

“Oh, is that so?”

I should probably interpret that as a sign that my very existence is feared.

“Still, I have to say, I was quite entertained by your little TV performance earlier. You’re really something else. I never thought you’d go so far as to hurt yourself for such a ridiculous charade. Maybe you’re a masochist after all.”

“Nope, I’m definitely on the S side. And while we’re at it, let’s get something straight: these injuries weren’t self-inflicted. They were caused by the police during an abusive interrogation. The police will be held accountable for this illegal conduct, so look forward to that.”

“Sorry to disappoint, but that’s impossible. The legal community knows all about your tricks. No one’s going to believe the police actually tortured you. I’d bet my life on it.”

“We’ll see. I don’t care what the crooked legal community thinks. What’s important is the general public. They love nothing more than taking a swing at state authority, and you know as well as I do that no judge wants to go against public opinion.”

“I see, that’s one way to think about it. In any case, rest assured—any injuries you sustained happened while you were at the police station. Chief Detective Endai will take full responsibility.”

So they’re going to throw Endai under the bus, huh? I don’t need this guy calling me a fraud.

“Well then, let’s get to it. We’ll begin your interrogation now. Not that I expect you to confess to anything.”

“That’s a wise assumption. Indeed, I don’t plan on saying a word, and this interrogation itself is already illegal.”

“Already illegal? Ha, what nonsense are you spouting now?”

“Exactly. This interrogation violates the human rights of the suspect. Even if I were to say anything here, it wouldn’t be adMs.ible as evidence.”

“Oh, that’s a novel little joke. Interesting. I wouldn’t mind hearing more. When exactly were your human rights violated?”

“Gladly. Let me tell you. It was the day before yesterday when I was arrested. As a suspect, I exercised my lawful right to contact the bar association and request a lawyer. And yet, I have not been allowed to meet with a lawyer to this day.”

“_____”

All expression drained from Togasaki's face.

Had he already figured out my plan from just that? If so, I had to admit he was sharp.

"…No way."

"That's right, Togasaki. Why haven't I been able to meet with a lawyer yet? It's because—"

I grinned and pounded my fist on the steel desk.

"Because the police deliberately prevented me from meeting with one, even after I requested a lawyer! This is a blatant violation of my rights as a suspect! I'll see them sued for this!"

"W-Wait, Zenko Yamashika! Did you really call the bar association!? Did you really request a lawyer!? And where's your proof that the police obstructed your meeting with the lawyer!?"

"At the very least, it's a fact that I called the bar association. I used the phone at the police station for that. There should be a record of the call. Check it if you don't believe me. And I definitely requested that they send a lawyer. You can ask Vice President Takeda of the bar association if you want."

A lawyer exists to protect people's rights. For that purpose, the Bar Association is established across the country, always prepared to dispatch a lawyer to someone in need. Ignoring a request for a lawyer's dispatch is absolutely unthinkable. No, it must never happen.

Especially considering that Takeda is the vice president of the Bar Association. As long as I claim that I requested a lawyer to be dispatched, he would undoubtedly back me up. No, he would have no choice but to do so—for the sake of the Bar Association's reputation above all. Of course, it's certain that I'll be in for a 24-hour-long lecture later.

"…I see, so that's it. Even though this happened before I had any influence, it appears I underestimated you a bit."

There was about twenty percent more bitterness in his tone.

Even Togasaki couldn't do anything about the tricks that I played before the case reached him.

"I'm suspending this interrogation for now. Wait here for a while."

"Heh, that's a wise decision. But don't keep me waiting too long, okay? I wouldn't want to claim I was tortured by the prosecutor's office after the police."

"...I hope that next time you get hit in a bad spot and die."

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Well, I had just beaten myself up at the police station. If I tried the same thing at the prosecutor's office, they'd definitely get suspicious.

Since there was nothing to do, I quietly waited for about thirty minutes.

Then, for some reason, I was taken to a small room inside the prosecutor's office that looked like a meeting room.

As I wondered what this was all about, the door opened, and to my surprise, who walked in but—

"Go hang yourself, you human-shaped camel cricket."

It was none other than Vice President Takeda of our Bar Association.

So that's why Togasaki halted the interrogation. He just wanted to create an opportunity for me to meet with a lawyer, any lawyer.

But still, why did it have to be this guy?

"Hey, Takeda. Don't you think your language gets worse every time we meet?"

"Who do you think is responsible for that, ehhhhhhhhhhhhh———!!"

With a deafening roar that shook the very air, Takeda slammed his fist onto the desk.

"Yamashika, what the hell do you think you're doing, using our Bar Association to outsmart the prosecution!? Depending on your answer, I won't let you off this time!"

"Not much, really. I just did what any lawyer would do to protect the rights of a suspect. It just so happens that this time, the suspect was me. And yet, here you are, which means you went along with my story, right? That I requested a lawyer to be dispatched?"

"Don't kid yourself! Who do you think would go along with your dirty tricks?! I'll deny it anytime—I'll say you never asked for a lawyer to be dispatched!"

Though he was shouting like a machine gun, he suddenly lowered his tone and added:

"Ugh, whatever. For the sake of the Bar Association's reputation, I won't touch on that matter anymore. From now on, I'll maintain a complete 'no comment' stance."

"Oh, is that so? Well, that's more than enough for me."

I grinned.

“Ugh, wipe that stupid smirk off your face, you eye of the tornado! Anyway, you’ve not only made a mockery of the prosecution, but you’ve dragged our Bar Association into your mess without hesitation! The prosecution and our Bar Association have completely agreed that keeping someone like you locked up in any institution of public authority is utterly pointless! Therefore, the prosecution will indict you today, assign you a lawyer, and apply for bail to kick you out into the streets as quickly as possible! Got any complaints?!”

“N-o-p-e, none whatsoever.”

So that’s how it is. They’re just trying to get rid of me. Fine by me. It was worth it to make a fool out of the cops and everyone else involved. With this, it looks like I’ll be out of jail pretty soon. Damn, if only things had moved a little faster, I might’ve made it for Yukina’s birthday.

“If that’s how it is, I’ve got no complaints. So, who’s the lawyer you’re assigning to me?”

“Ugh…”

A look of dissatisfaction appeared on Takeda’s face, about thirty percent more than before.

Damn. Could it really be…?

“…Listen carefully, Zenko Yamashika. First, let me make one thing clear. The Bar Association will never allow a criminal—especially a murderer—to come from its ranks. Therefore, even though you’ve been arrested, until a guilty verdict is confirmed, we will not strip you of your lawyer’s badge.”

“Heh, much appreciated.”

It’s true that losing my lawyer’s license would severely limit my options, so keeping it is helpful. Of course, this is probably more about protecting the reputation of the Bar Association than about saving me. But that’s fine—alliances formed by mutual benefit are more trustworthy anyway.

“And knowing you, even when the trial starts, you’re planning to represent yourself, aren’t you?”

“Of course I am.”

It’s not about money or the hassle of dealing with people. There’s simply no other lawyer who could win an acquittal in a criminal trial except me.

“Very well, it’s only right to clean up your own mess. I have no issue with that. However, even if a defendant represents themselves, they must still be assigned a lawyer. That’s the law. But here’s the good news: not a single lawyer from our Bar Association volunteered to defend you. Not one.”

“That’s just as well. I don’t need any of those worthless lawyers who’ve never won a criminal case.”

“Shut up, you con artist! That’s why I’m the one stuck defending you! Ugh, don’t look so disgusted! I hate this ten times more than you do!”

…Figures. Well, I kind of saw this coming.

“Hey, Takeda. I’ve been thinking… Why is the Creator of this world so unfair? First, I’m falsely accused of a crime, and now you’re assigned as my lawyer. Why is it always me who gets the short end of the stick? This is discrimination, plain and simple.”

Thanks to that, I Ms.ed Yukina's birthday.

“Is that so? A difference of opinion, I suppose. As far as I’m concerned, the Creator is the most fair being in the universe. Though, I admit, that’s because He spreads His malice equally. Put yourself in my shoes, having to defend a disgrace like you.”

“Ha! Don’t worry about it. In a month, you’ll have a great story to brag about. You’ll be able to say you won an acquittal in a criminal trial, where the conviction rate is ninety-nine percent. I bet you’ve never pulled that off before, have you? Winning a criminal case, I mean.”

“Hmm. That’s exactly the kind of reckless statement I’d expect from someone like you, who doesn’t care in the slightest about the impact this will have on the legal world.”

“Thanks for the compliment. The legal world? Who cares about that? Honestly, that’s such a typical concern for someone like you, who’s obsessed with factions and turf. You sheep can’t do anything unless you flock together.”

“…Fine. I’ve had enough. I just remembered how pointless it is to argue with you. Let’s move this along. First, as your lawyer, I’m obligated to ask you this. You didn’t really kill the victim, did you?”

“Of course not. Some bastard framed me.”

“I see. So, if you’re not the culprit, do you have any idea who the real perpetrator might be?”

“Yeah.”

“W-What!?”

He couldn’t hide his surprise.

“Is that true? You really know who the real culprit is?”

“It’s true. It’s not that surprising, though. You see, this case has a certain backstory—”

I told Takeda.

A secretary for a city council member named Hiroshi Ebata came to me, asking for my support in a whistleblowing case.

The whistleblower claimed that city council member Kosuke Akamura had teamed up with a city official, Aotani, and a construction company president, Rokuda, to unlawfully profit by subcontracting public works projects.

So, we went to Akamura’s office to gather evidence for the whistleblowing. But after drinking the coffee there, I lost consciousness.

When I woke up, in my right hand was a blood-soaked knife, and in front of me, the dead body of Hiroshi Ebata.

“…I see. Whether it’s true or not, it sounds like something that could happen to you, with your reputation as the ‘Grim Reaper Lawyer.’ But seriously, what’s with those ridiculous names? Akamura, Aotani, and Rokuda? Are they the three primary colors or something?”

“Exactly, mix them together, and it all turns pitch black.”

“Who said you could make jokes? I don’t care if you’re convicted of murder, but as a citizen, I can’t just ignore the fact that public works corruption is happening. Is there any evidence, even a shred of it, about this subcontracting scheme?”

“There’s no way there’s any left,” I spat out. “They’re the kind of crew that won’t leave a trace of evidence behind, especially since they didn’t even hesitate to commit murder to divert the police’s attention.”

Takeda stroked his chin, thinking.

“…Hmm. Honestly, this feels a bit like your imagination running wild. But, as your lawyer—no matter how much I’d rather not waste my energy on this—I’m obligated to believe your nonsense if you’re claiming it. I could have someone investigate this, but only if you’re willing to cover the costs.”

“Go ahead. But let me choose the investigator. You know that hack detective Kageno who hangs around my office, right? Use him.”

“Understood. I’ll make the arrangements. Alright, I think we’ve covered everything. Just wait quietly until this evening. You’ll probably be out on bail by then. Don’t cause any more trouble, you hear?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

—Perhaps it was because Takeda, the lawyer, got involved, but from that point on, things progressed at an unusual pace, hour by hour.

4:00 PM The prosecution filed murder charges against me.

5:00 PM My bail request was approved.

And at 6:00 PM, due to the public nature of the case, and to avoid any further media frenzy, I was released on bail under the condition that I refrain from any contact with the press.

January 11th, 6:30 PM, Yamashika Law Office

As expected, there were already a few reporters lingering in front of the building where my office is located. However, since no one anticipated my release this early, there weren’t too many of them yet. It looked like the real media storm would start tomorrow.

Still, since I was technically forbidden from contacting the media, I snuck back into the office through the back door.

“Ahhh!? Yukina, the criminal is back—!”

…Of course, the one who greeted me with such an unpleasant line was none other than Satsuki.

Why is it that this brat always shows up at the worst possible moments? It should’ve been Yukina welcoming me back first in a situation like this, not her.

But Yukina must have heard Satsuki’s voice because she soon appeared as well.

“Oh, Mr. Zenko! Welcome back!”

Seeing her smile, as delicate as a flower, I finally felt like I was truly back in the free world.

“Yeah, I’m back.”

“I’m so glad! Does this mean you were released?”

“No, it’s bail. Unfortunately, they’re starting the trial the day after tomorrow.”

“I see… But are you okay? That injury…”

“Oh, this?”

I touched the big bandage stuck to my forehead.

“It’s nothing. Just a little something from getting hit by those weak-ass cops. No big deal.”

“Are you sure? If you say so… Oh, by the way, it’s almost dinner time. You must be hungry, right? I can cook something.”

“Yeah, that’d be great. The food in the holding cell barely fills you up.”

“Alright, just give me a moment.”

Yukina started to head to the next room.

“Oh, Yukina. About that.”

“Yes?”

“Sorry. Today is your birthday, and I completely missed it.”

Yukina smiled brightly and said,

“It’s okay. After all, I help out here at Yamashika Law Office. I’m always prepared for things like this.”

“…Thanks. I’ll make it up to you next time.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it.”

With that, Yukina disappeared into the other room.

But knowing my luck, something crazy will probably happen again before I get a chance to make it up to her.

“You know, you’re really good at lying through your teeth.”

It was Satsuki again, pulling me out of my brief moment of bliss.

“…What? When did I lie?”

“Oh, come on. You’re practically made of lies. You probably hit your head on a table or something to get that injury.”

…Why does this brat never take me at my word?

“Hey, brat. Why would I do something like that? Don’t get it wrong—this injury is from the cops beating me up.”

“Yeah, right. Then tell me this: why would the police do something like that? They know better than anyone what kind of trouble they’d get into if they hit someone like you.”

…Why is this brat so sharp when it comes to stuff like this?

“Hey, Satsuki.”

“Yeah, what?”

“You’re a nuisance. Go home. It’s late.”

“No way. I still have winter break homework to finish, and I can’t just leave Yukina alone with a murderer.”

“…You little… I’ll call the cops and have you arrested for trespassing.”

“Go ahead, see if I care. In that case, maybe I’ll report you instead. Something like, ‘A murder suspect just tried to make a move on a young woman.’ The media is outside, so I’m sure it’ll make a great story. And I’ll be protecting Yukina too.”

…At this point, I seriously considered whether I should do something about this brat before she gets any smarter.

And so, this precious day—Yukina’s 20th birthday—ended with nothing more than a simple meal. Go to hell.

January 12th, 11:35 AM, Yamashika Law Office

'…Now for the next news story. In connection with the arrest of Attorney Zenko Yamashika, the Bar Association to which he belongs held a press conference, announcing that they are not currently considering any disciplinary actions, such as revoking his license.'

The next day arrived.

I was about to receive a report from Kageno, who had come to the office, but the TV began playing that news, so I decided to listen in first.

'Attorney Takeda, who spoke at the press conference, stated, "In a nation governed by the rule of law, a criminal defendant is only deemed a criminal after being convicted in a trial. Additionally, given that Attorney Yamashika has successfully cleared several clients of false charges in the past, the Bar Association will not impose any disciplinary actions until a guilty verdict is confirmed." That concludes the news related to the arrest of Attorney Yamashika.

In other news, it has come to light that some staff members at the prosecutor's office were caught drinking inside the government building, leading to widespread criticism for their lack of discipline.

According to the investigation, this drinking party took place simultaneously last night at several prosecutor's offices in the Kanto and Tohoku regions after regular working hours. The prosecutor's office commented, "We just got carried away and did it in a spur of the moment. It was careless, and we regret it, but we're not sorry, and there's no problem."

Meanwhile, in connection with this incident, Yamada, the representative of the "Association for Criticizing Prosecutors Whenever Something Happens," submitted an inquiry asking whether this had any connection to the recent arrest of a certain lawyer. However, the prosecutor's office has invoked its right to remain silent, citing Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution as a defense. We still don't know how exactly Article 9, which renounces war, is connected to the right to remain silent.

Now, for the next news. Major airline companies ANA and JAL have announced their merger and the establishment of a new company. The name of the new company will be ANAL, and ripples are spreading across the industry—'

…I instinctively turned off the TV to shut it up.

"Hey, what gives? You didn't have to turn it off, that was a funny news story."

"Shut up."

I silenced the complaining slacker detective with a single word and brought the cup of tea to my lips.

The world is full of idiots. A drinking party? Give me a break. Making someone's misfortune into your drinking entertainment is unforgivable. I'm not such a nice guy that I'd just sit quietly after being mocked like that.

I may be forbidden by the court from contacting the media, but who cares at this point? I'm going to hit back hard.

"Fine, let's hear your report, you damn sleepy detective."

"…You know, whose fault do you think it is that I'm sleep-deprived?"

Kageno, with dark circles under his eyes, glared at me.

Yesterday afternoon, Takeda suddenly requested that he investigate city council member Akamura. Judging by the fact it took all night, it must've been quite the pain.

"It was just a joke, don't take it seriously. So, what did you find out?"

"Right. I'll be straight with you—this is going to be tough, Yamashika."

That was the first report.

"What do you mean?"

"First, about the city council member Akamura, who you pegged as the prime suspect. The guy has a solid alibi. On January 9th, he was at a New Year's party with other council members all day. He even stayed until the third afterparty. Sure, he probably went to the bathroom a few times, but there's no record of him disappearing for more than a few minutes between 5 and 9 PM on the 9th. There are dozens of witnesses who saw him the whole time."

"I see, so that's how it is."

If his own secretary was murdered, it's easy to predict that the police investigation would focus on him. Akamura must have known that having an airtight alibi was crucial. He probably didn't personally commit the murder—he just orchestrated it from behind the scenes.

"What about the other two? What were their names again, the official Aotani and the company president Rokuda?"

"Ah, those two are more likely suspects. Rokuda's currently out of work, so he's just spending his days doing nothing. Aotani, being a civil servant, leaves work every day promptly at 5 PM. It takes about 30 minutes to get from the city hall to the crime scene, so he could've easily arrived by 6 without any issues. And that's not all—Rokuda recently injured his left arm and has it wrapped in a bandage."

"…That's pretty much a dead giveaway. Akamura was just calling the shots, and those two did the actual dirty work."

"Yeah, that's probably it. But proving it is going to be tough. At first glance, there's no apparent connection between the victim, Ebata, and those two, nor is there any obvious motive for them to kill him. Just having an injury on his hand isn't enough evidence, and it's unlikely they'll show up on the police's radar."

That's entirely true. However, it's not like all hope is lost.

"What about the public works subcontracting scandal? Do you think we can prove that in court?"

If we can prove that Aotani and Rokuda had a motive to kill the victim, that would be enough. To do that, we need to prove that the three of them were connected through the illegal subcontracting of public works.

"I hate to say it, but that's going to be pretty difficult too. We don't have anyone willing to help us."

"What? Why? Aren't there plenty of construction companies that have been screwed over by the subcontracting scheme? We should be able to get them on our side easily."

"Here's the thing: Akamura isn't just some run-of-the-mill villain. Most of the public works projects happening in this city are ones that Akamura led and secured funding for from the national government. You wouldn't understand since you run your own business and don't rely on others, but for small and medium-sized companies, getting even a single contract can be a life-or-death matter. For them, it doesn't matter if Akamura's a devil—they'd see him as a god if he's giving them work. Even if Akamura's a criminal, they'd gladly become our enemies to protect their livelihood. And it's not like Akamura is subcontracting every single public works project."

"…This is bad."

To reveal the truth behind this case and claim that someone other than me—namely Akamura—killed Ebata, we need to establish a motive. The best way to do that is to prove that Akamura was involved in illegal subcontracting of public works. But it's probably impossible to get any concrete evidence for that. If that's the case, we'd have to rely on witness testimony, but if we can't find anyone, there's nothing we can do.

"Alright, I got it. Kageno, your next job is this: find someone. No matter what, find a witness who will testify for us. Someone with a strong sense of justice, someone who's on the verge of snapping and doesn't care anymore—there's got to be at least one person like that out there."

"I figured you'd say that. Well, I'll do the job, but how about you pay me for what I've already done first? It's right after the New Year, and my wallet's running dry."

"Tsk."

I clicked my tongue and opened my wallet. I was just as broke as he was. Things had been such a mess that I hadn't even had time to go to the bank.

I pulled out a few bills and handed them to Kageno.

"What the hell? This is only 50 dollars! And one of them is a 20 dollar bill!? This won't even cover my travel and food expenses!"

"Shut up. I'm broke too. I'll pay you plenty once I get a chance to go to the bank. For now, deal with it."

And then, at that very moment—

What timing. The phone rang.

"Oh, a call. Alright, alright, save your complaints for later and get going."

"Tch, fine."

Kageno still looked dissatisfied, but he must've known the saying "you can't squeeze blood from a stone," because he reluctantly left the office.

Come to think of it, when I have Kageno do investigations for someone else's criminal defense, I can charge the client for all the expenses. But when it's for my own defense, it's all out of my own pocket. They really do say that the outcome of a trial depends on how much money you have.

With that thought in mind, I picked up the receiver. The phone had been ringing non-stop since last night. Every call was either from the press or some bad-news phone call, so I'd been seriously considering just yanking the phone cord out.

"Hello, Yamashika Law Office."

'Um, sorry for the sudden call, but is this Mr. Yamashika?'

"Yes, that's me. And who might you be?"

It was a young woman's voice. She didn't sound like a reporter or a bearer of bad news, so I was curious who it could be.

'My name is Kotone Kokushima. I was… Hiroshi's girlfriend. The Hiroshi who was killed… Hiroshi Ebata.'

A bolt of lightning shot through my brain.

For Ebata’s girlfriend to call me—the person currently regarded as the murderer—does that mean… is this what they call revenge?

"I-I see. So, what can I help you with today?"

'P-Please, don’t misunderstand. I don’t think you’re the killer. No, I can’t believe you are. Um, I know this is rude, but…would it be alright if I came over right now? There’s something I need to discuss.'

…Hmm.

This has turned into a strange situation. She's coming to consult me, even though I might be her lover's killer? What kind of consultation could this be? Besides, even if she claims to be Ebata's girlfriend, I have no solid reason to believe her. Not that I see any reason for her to lie about that, though.

Now, what to do.

Ordinarily, this would be a moment to be on guard against a trap. But my motto has always been, “Nothing ventured, nothing gained.” For instance, what if this woman had received some documents from Ebata, and they happened to be proof of the public works subcontracting scandal…?

That might be too optimistic. Still, it's true that we're stuck at the moment. I have no reason to refuse.

"Alright, fine."

I allowed this woman, Kokushima, to visit on the condition that she enter via the back entrance of the building, dressed as inconspicuously as possible.

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—Was Ebata into young girls?

That was my first thought when I laid eyes on this woman, Kokushima.

Despite my instructions to dress inconspicuously, she came in a school uniform. She looked like a high school student, no matter how you looked at her. Well, if she weren’t wearing the uniform, she might have passed for a college student.

So, Ebata was into that sort of thing? No, that’s not it—being five years younger would still be borderline appropriate, right? But that’s not really the issue here.

What’s more important is that I need to be on guard. Her expression seemed tense. Well, having lost her boyfriend, that’s understandable. And she might still suspect me as his killer. If she suddenly pulls a knife out of her bag, I might need to make a run for it without hesitation.

"So, Ms. Kokushima, can you tell me why you don't think I killed Mr. Ebata?"

"Yes… First, I should clarify that I’m not saying for certain that you're not the killer. But at the same time, I’m not convinced you are, either."

"I see. So, you still have some doubts about me. Well, that’s perfectly fine. From my perspective, I’m grateful to have even a little belief that I might not be the killer. But still, what makes you think that?"

"Yes. Um, did you know that Hiroshi was trying to expose a certain city council member?"

She answered my question with a question of her own.

"Let's see. Well, what if I said I did know?"

"About a week ago, Hiroshi told me. He said he was going to expose someone in power and that he really needed someone to back him up. He said he was going to ask you, a well-known local lawyer, for support. So, I just don’t think you had any reason to kill him."

That was indeed a reasonable explanation. I might be able to lower my guard a little.

"I see, I understand. So, why have you come here today? I doubt you came here just to tell me that."

"Yes. I mentioned it when I called, but there’s something I need to consult with you about. I’ve been summoned to testify in court."

What? Of course, I didn’t request that. So, naturally—

"So, you're a prosecution witness? What exactly are they asking you to testify about?"

"I don’t know. They just said they want me to testify about my relationship with Hiroshi…"

"Hmm."

If I were to think about it logically, it’s probably something like this.

They'll bring in a high school girl, someone who was very close to the victim, and make her tearfully testify like this:

'Please sentence the evil lawyer who took my precious boyfriend away to death!'

That would undoubtedly make the jury hate me.

"I see, I understand your position. So, Ms. Kotone Kokushima, what is it you want from me?"

"…What I really want to know is the truth about the case. I can't say for sure whether you killed Hiroshi or not at this point. But I think the more suspicious person is Akamura, the city council member. So, Mr. Yamashika, if you're willing to expose the truth, like you have in the cases you've handled so far, I want to help you."

I see. Given that situation, it's not strange for her to offer her cooperation.

In that case, I have no reason to refuse. I might as well make use of her.

This trial's defendant isn't some stranger—I'm the one on trial. I need to eliminate as many uncertainties as I can, and if I can neutralize a prosecution witness or two, all the better.

But in this case, it's going to be difficult to prevent her from testifying.

After all, she's a high school student. I can't claim that she's unavailable due to work or anything like that. And if I were to make her disappear, it could easily be seen as kidnapping or unlawful confinement of a minor…

…Wait a minute. Speaking of students in January…

"Ms. Kokushima. You look like a high school student—are you, by any chance, in your third year?"

"Yes, I am."

"Then, you must be in the middle of university entrance exams, right?"

For a student taking entrance exams, this would be a crucial time in their life. That might be a valid reason for her to avoid testifying in court.

"No. I'm not taking the exams. I plan to go to a vocational school."

But my reasoning crumbled easily.

"Well, I guess there’s no two ways about it then. For now, please attend the trial. The prosecution will likely try to get you to testify that you want me to face the harshest punishment possible for killing your boyfriend. So, just testify as you see fit. It’s fine if you say you don’t think I’m the killer."

"Understood. Then, should I also testify that Hiroshi was planning to expose the city councilor Akamura?"

"No, keep quiet about that during the prosecution's questioning. I’ll reveal it at the appropriate time."

"Got it. I’ll do that."

It seemed like Kokushima had finished her story, so I decided to ask her a few questions of my own.

"By the way, I have a couple of things I'd like to ask you as well. Ms. Kokushima, did Mr. Ebata ever give you any documents or anything like that?"

"No, nothing like that…"

"I see. One more thing—I’d like to confirm something. Of course, I’m not the killer, and I intend to uncover the truth for my own sake. But, hypothetically speaking, if it turned out that I was the killer, what would you do?"

"In that case—"

For just a moment, I felt like I saw a dark flame flare up in the girl’s eyes.

"I would kill you. No matter what it takes."

"…Well, I should be careful, then."

I let out a comment that was far too inappropriate to be a joke.

Regardless of age, a woman who talks about revenge is the most terrifying thing in this world.

"Well, I’ll be taking my leave now. I’m sure you’re busy, Mr. Yamashika."

"Yes, thank you. You've been a great help."

"No, I haven’t really done that much. Oh, and… I have one more favor to ask."

"Yes, what is it?"

"Would it be alright if I came by here from time to time? I really want to know who killed Hiroshi as soon as possible."

Hmm, I see.

It’s true that court cases can be hard to follow just by watching from the sidelines. I can understand the desire to be by my side and hear about the progress.

But if Kageno reports something while she’s here and we find out who the real killer is, this girl might go off to kill them herself. If that happens, the trial would spiral into chaos.

That said, she’s offering to cooperate with me. I can’t be too cold towards her. I just have to make sure I don’t give her too much information.

"Alright, that's fine. However, I can’t provide you with all the information. I may have to ask you to leave as necessary."

"Yes, that’s perfectly fine. Thank you very much."

With a bow of her head, Kokushima said, "I’ll take my leave for today," and made to leave the office.

But at that moment, a thought crossed my mind, and I decided to stop her for a little longer.

"Ah, wait a moment. There’s a large crowd of reporters gathered outside the building. If you walk out normally, there’s no telling what might happen. I’ll distract them, so could you leave through the back door in the meantime?"

"Huh? Oh, yes, of course, I don’t mind."

Might as well. I’ll take this opportunity to mess with the police and prosecutors a little more.

◆

The news of my bail release must have already spread. The number of reporters gathered at the main entrance of the building had multiplied several times compared to yesterday.

And as soon as the person they were waiting for—me—appeared, they swarmed toward me like ants on sugar, thrusting microphones in my face.

"Mr. Yamashika!"

"Can we get a comment?"

"About the incident this time!"

A barrage of questions flew at me.

"Please, everyone, calm down. I can't answer if you throw questions at me like that."

I tried to soothe the situation and restore some order.

Thanks to that, a somewhat more formal interview atmosphere returned to the scene, and a reporter at the front thrust a microphone toward me.

"Mr. Yamashika, did you kill the victim, Mr. Ebata!?"

"The answer is a clear 'no.' I can only say that for now, so please bear with me. Don't worry, in a couple of days, I'll reveal the whole truth in court."

The crowd murmured, but soon another reporter fired off a question.

"The injuries you have, Mr. Yamashika—are they from being beaten by the police during interrogation?"

"Yes, that's correct. Naturally, there will be accountability for this later. In any case, the police's handling of this case has been blatantly illegal. Not just the violent interrogation, but other things as well. For instance, as an accused person, I exercised my right to request a lawyer. However, I wasn't allowed to meet with one until I was sent to the prosecutors. The police deliberately obstructed this and violated my rights."

At this point, another reporter raised their hand and asked,

"But according to the police's statement, they say that you declined the need for a lawyer. What do you say to that?"

"That's an outrageous lie."

I shrugged and quickly responded.

"That's just the kind of thing the police would say. They'll tell any lie to make things line up. In the first place, what would I gain from lying about not wanting a lawyer? Oh, and by the way, didn't the police also say something like this? That the injuries I have were self-inflicted?"

第三章
新・東からきた検察官

Chapter 3: The New Prosecutor from the East

January 13th, 9:58 AM, District Courtroom No. 3

On this day, the courtroom was overflowing with people.

After all, it was a trial that had become quite the topic of conversation, even making the news. It was only natural to expect such a crowd.

To my surprise, I even spotted city councilor Akamura, someone I'd seen on TV, sitting in the gallery. Well, considering he was the victim's employer, it wasn't that strange.

But regardless of all that, I had been feeling depressed since morning.

It wasn't because my trial as a defendant was about to begin. Trials are nothing new to me, and the fact that I'm the defendant doesn't give me any reason to feel gloomy or nervous. This is just another case where I'll use my usual courtroom tactics and give it my all.

Well, actually, this time I might have to go a bit more all-out than usual. Since I'm the defendant, even if I'm found not guilty, I can't afford to leave even a shadow of doubt. After all, the job of a defense attorney inherently demands a spotless... uh, spotless... 'ingretity'—wait, no, what was that? Spotless 'intigratti'? Ah, right, 'spotless integrity'! I really do forget words I don't use often.

Anyway, it's not just a matter of avoiding a guilty verdict—ending this with a gray area would also be bad for my career as a lawyer. What's required is complete exoneration. And to achieve that, I absolutely need to expose the real culprit.

But here's where the problem arises. Yes, the very reason I've been in such a foul mood all morning.

It's because of two people.

The first one is obvious. Instead of quietly doing some minor bureaucratic work in Tokyo, where he's assigned, he's flown all the way here just to steal another prosecutor's case, only to lose and go back home with his tail between his legs. That's become a pattern for the Hyena Prosecutor, Togasaki. If he were just a hyena, that would be fine, but facing off against that twisted, stubborn jerk is… quite exhausting, to be honest.

And the other person is the judge presiding over this trial, Judge Ishikari.

I have no intention of criticizing Judge Ishikari's qualifications as a presiding judge. In fact, he's fair, and I'd rather have him than some strange judge who might hold biased views against me. However, the problem with this judge is that he's incredibly stubborn and prioritizes logic above

all else. Well, I guess that's to be expected of judges in general, but this one in particular has a unique trait—he won't let existing rules bind him as long as the logic makes sense.

While it's convenient for me that he's not bound by conventional rules, I'm more inclined to follow the principle of "the end justifies the means." If our approaches don't mesh well, things could get troublesome.

And to make matters worse, with Togasaki—Mr. "I Breathe Arguments"— as my opponent, who knows what kind of chemical reaction might occur. Thanks to that, my stomach has been in knots since morning.

"Now, I'd like to begin this court session… but," Judge Ishikari began.

With his characteristic sharp gaze, he scanned the courtroom.

"Before we proceed, I have a question for the defense."

The judge didn't look at me—but rather, he glared at Takeda, who was seated next to me. Takeda, who was only there as a legal requirement, essentially a figurehead.

"Attorney Takeda?"

"Y-Yes, Your Honor?"

"If I recall correctly, when I granted the defendant bail, I issued an order prohibiting any contact with the media."

"Yes, I remember that."

"Good. Then let's get straight to the point. Are you telling me that the person I saw on TV yesterday was not the defendant?"

The judge glared at us with a piercing gaze. Why are all the legal professionals I know so bad at controlling their facial expressions?

But Takeda, being the Vice President of the Bar Association, wasn't shaken by such a minor threat.

"Your Honor, first of all, let me say that I have no intention of making excuses. However, I would like you to understand this: I've had an extremely difficult time with this client. As you're aware, the defendant is a qualified lawyer himself, and no matter how much advice I give from my position as his counsel, he goes and does whatever he… I mean, he acts independently.

The reason I took on the defense of such a reckless client in the first place is simply that no other competent lawyer was available."

"…Attorney Takeda. Let's not beat around the bush here. What exactly are you trying to say?"

"My apologies, Your Honor. Then I'll be blunt. In short, I'm at my wit's end."

Ah, is that so.

Still, why do I have to be subjected to this in a criminal trial where my life is on the line? Maybe I should file a complaint with the Bar Association.

"I see, I understand your situation. But let me ask you this: Do you realize that your explanation does not answer my question? What I want to know is why the defendant violated the court's order and held a press conference."

"I apologize for my roundabout explanation. However, I first wanted you to understand the unreasonable circumstances I've been dealing with.

Now, regarding why the defendant broke the terms of his bail: I clearly communicated Your Honor's order to the defendant. Yes, I made it very clear. But as you saw on TV, my instructions were completely ignored. In other words, from my standpoint, it was beyond my control. I, too, am a victim here. I can't be expected to control everything the defendant does."

For someone who had risen to the position of Vice President of the Bar Association, that was an embarrassingly childish attempt to shirk responsibility.

But here's the strange thing: both Togasaki, the spectators, and even the judge seemed to be nodding in agreement, as if they were thinking, "Well, with a defendant like that, what can you do?" Wait, have you ever heard of a lawyer who shifts the blame onto their own client?

"…Defendant Yamashika?"

The sharp gaze now turned toward me.

"Y-Yes, Your Honor?"

"Your attorney has stated his case. It's true that you're a qualified lawyer yourself, and that means you have the knowledge and experience to act independently, even under these circumstances. Taking that into account, I'd like you to answer: Why did you violate the conditions of your bail and engage with the media?"

"Allow me to explain."

The judge’s gaze was intimidating, but there was no need to be afraid. I stood up confidently.

Still, what a tense start to the trial. Well, it’s my fault, though.

"Your Honor, first of all, I would like you to understand that I did not actively seek out contact with the media. As I was leaving my office, they surrounded me, forcing contact. In other words, in a similar way as Attorney Takeda said, it was beyond my control.

Secondly, while it’s true that I may have been prohibited from engaging with the media, I don’t recall being given permission to infringe on the public’s constitutional right to know.

And one more point: while I may have been forbidden from contacting the media, the prosecution has not been bound by the same restriction. They can hold press conferences whenever they like or leak information at will, painting me as a murderer in the process. This isn’t unique to this case—it’s a common prosecutorial tactic in criminal trials, and I believe it’s a gross violation of the constitutional principle of equality before the law.

Therefore, based on my own principles, I believed that providing an opportunity to explain myself in a way that fulfilled the media’s 'right to know' did not violate any orders, any laws, or any constitutional provisions. However, if you say that such actions do indeed violate some form of regulation, then I will devote the rest of my life to thoroughly contesting its legality in court."

The judge looked somewhat exasperated, rather than convinced. His eyes darted about before he shot a sharp glare down at me. Quite intimidating.

"…Defendant Yamashika?"

"Yes."

"Are you aware that what you're engaging in is sophistry?"

"I’ll be sure to check the dictionary when I get home."

"Good. Then while you’re at it, add this note to the dictionary: 'This court has no tolerance for people who wield sophistry.'"

"Thank you for the lesson, Your Honor."

"Well, I’ll let it slide this time. I should also reflect on the fact that I wasn’t mindful enough of who I was giving my orders to. Additionally, I cannot overlook that the prosecution, as well as the defense, has shown a lack of sufficient decorum in this matter."

Is he referring to the drinking party at the prosecutor’s office?

"However, this is the only time I'll let this slide. If anyone violates my orders in this courtroom from now on, I will immediately apply charges of contempt of court. This is the first and last warning to both the defense and the prosecution. You've been warned."

Both I and Togasaki nodded obediently.

Then I leaned over and whispered to Takeda, who was sitting next to me.

"Alright, your part's over now. I'll handle the rest, so just sit back and watch quietly."

"Fine. It's your trial—do as you please. But you understand, don't you? If you're found guilty, you'll be disbarred immediately. You'd better be prepared to fight for your life."

"Hmph. Why would I think about losing before I've even started? Just because you keep losing criminal cases doesn't mean you have to act like a defeatist."

"You can call me whatever you want, but I'm not going to get riled up by someone who was dumb enough to get arrested for murder. More importantly, for the love of God, don't get into any stupid arguments. I can't stand the thought of being lumped together with you."

I chose not to respond. Even though it was Takeda, whom I despised, I thought it best to leave him in despair for as long as possible—that was the only reason for my uncharacteristic restraint. After all, I do have some sense of honor, like a true man of principle.

Don't get into any stupid arguments? That's impossible. My opponent is that hyena Togasaki.

"Now, let's begin the trial again. Prosecutor Togasaki, call your first witness."

"Understood. However—"

For some reason, Togasaki hesitated, glancing at me as if to gauge my reaction.

"The witness has requested to testify in a manner that respects their privacy. I would like to ask for your permission, Your Honor."

What on earth is he talking about? A testimony that respects privacy? Does he mean they want to put up a screen around the witness stand so that the gallery can't see them?

"That's… unusual. Well, I'll consider it if there are special circumstances."

"Yes, without such considerations, the witness's daily life could be significantly affected by testifying here."

"I assume, of course, that the reasons for this will be revealed during the testimony?"

"Of course. If, after hearing the testimony, Your Honor concludes that such privacy measures were unnecessary, I have no objections to making everything public."

"Very well. On the condition that such special circumstances are revealed, I will allow the necessary arrangements."

Hmm. The first witness is probably just some bystander or informant, right? Why would they need to go to such lengths?

I couldn't stand the idea of letting Togasaki get his way so easily, so I stood up and spoke.

"Your Honor! I object, for now!"

"Objection overruled."

Of course it is.

At Togasaki's direction, a frosted glass screen was set up around the witness stand, obscuring it from the view of the gallery. However, it only covered the back and sides; the witness was in full view of me, the jurors, and the judge. I suppose they figured that since we're bound by confidentiality, there's no need to worry.

The witness entered, hiding their face under a jacket. What an entrance. It's not like they're a suspect being transferred by the prosecution or something.

Once the witness reached the stand, they removed the jacket. Underneath was a man in his early thirties.

He looked like the kind of quiet, unassuming guy you'd see at a big trading company. Tall but slim, with a sharp, angular face and glasses, he gave off an almost delicate impression. He didn't seem the type to stand out or make waves, so he probably wasn't disliked by his superiors or subordinates.

Hmm. For some reason, his face looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn't quite place where I'd seen him before.

"Your Honor, for now, I'd like to refer to this witness as 'Mr. A.'"

"Very well. As before, this is on the condition that the need for privacy is demonstrated."

"Objection!" I immediately slammed my hand on the desk. "Your Honor! Referring to him as 'Mr. A' is awkward. Since we're in Japan, we should at least call him something like Yamada (alias) or Watanabe (alias) or Suzuki (alias)."

"…Defendant—no, defense counsel. Are you being serious?"

"Yes, I am officially requesting it. 'Mr. A' just doesn't have any flavor. 'Mr. Yamada (alias)' would be much better."

The judge and Togasaki both glared at me. But since they couldn't come up with an effective counterargument, they eventually gave up.

"…Very well. Prosecutor Togasaki, please accommodate that to some extent."

"…Understood. We'll refer to him as Mr. Yamada (alias). Now then, Mr. Yamada (alias), do you swear to testify truthfully, based on your conscience?"

"Yes, I swear."

"You were the one who reported this incident to the police, correct?"

"Yes."

…Ah, so that's his role.

Now I remembered.

When I was found with Ebata's body and that group of strange men saw me, I think this guy's face was among them.

But still, the mystery deepens.

He's just an informant and a witness, right? Why is it necessary to enclose the witness stand and take such privacy precautions?

"Now, please describe the situation at the time. When exactly did this happen?"

"I believe… it was around 7:30 PM on January 10th."

What? Wait a minute. Was it really the 10th?

As if to confirm my own doubts, I noticed Togasaki's cheek twitch slightly.

"…Mr. Yamada (alias), could it be that you're mistaken? Wasn't it actually January 9th?"

"Eh?… Oh, was it?"

This was an unexpected opportunity for me.

"Objection! That was clearly a leading question!"

"Sustained."

"…Understood. I'll rephrase the question. Mr. Yamada (alias), let me ask again: on what date did this incident take place?"

"Objection! That question has already been asked. There's no need to ask it again!"

"No, wait!" Mr. Yamada (alias) suddenly leaned forward, panicking. "I'm sorry, I misspoke! It was indeed January 9th!"

"Your Honor, if I may," Togasaki interjected. "It is a well-established fact that this incident occurred on January 9th. For the defense to harp on such minor lapses in the witness's memory seems to be nothing more than a deliberate attempt to obstruct the trial's progress."

"You've got some nerve, Prosecutor Togasaki," I shot back, unwilling to back down. "Do you know how many people have been wrongfully accused because of those 'minor memory lapses'?"

"Here we go again with your favorite tactic, switching the argument. Why do you always complicate simple matters?"

Because I'm a lawyer, that's why—

"Order! I won't allow any more personal attacks!"

Before I could respond, the gavel slammed down with a bang.

"There's no point in bickering over this any further. The court acknowledges the correction to the testimony. However, the fact that the witness initially testified that the date was January 10th will not be removed from the record."

"Your Honor! I formally object!"

"Overruled."

The judge looked thoroughly fed up, so I obediently backed down. I had to admit that I might have gone a little overboard with the petty arguments right from the start. It's best not to anger women or judges. Besides, I'd already succeeded in my goal of ruffling Togasaki's feathers.

"Prosecutor Togasaki, please proceed."

"Understood. Now, Mr. Yamada (alias), where were you on the night of January 9th?"

"I was at the riverbank in the Tsura River."

"And when did you first notice something unusual?"

…Wait a second.

Hold on, Togasaki. Shouldn't you ask something else before that? It was a freezing cold night by the riverbank, with the wind blowing through a field of grass. Shouldn't the first question be why he was there in the first place?

"It was around 7:30 PM, I believe."

But Togasaki showed no intention of changing the order of his questions. I have no idea what's going on in his head.

"Alright, then please explain what happened next, step by step."

"Yes. I was in the grassy area by the river when I suddenly heard someone scream."

"What kind of scream was it?"

"Well, it was kind of like, 'Uwaaah!'—that kind of scream."

"And after you heard the scream, what did you do?"

"I didn't do anything at first. I was too scared. Actually, I wasn't alone at the time; I was with another man. And there were quite a few other people around us, too. So, some of the people, including the man I was with, ran towards where the scream had come from. I had no choice but to follow them."

"And when you reached the scene, what did you see?"

"When we got there, about ten people had already gathered. In the middle were two young men. One of them was lying on the ground, and the other was sitting down, looking weak."

"Is the man who was sitting down here in this courtroom?"

"Yes."

"Who is it? Point to him."

Without hesitation, Yamada (alias) pointed at me. But that was already common knowledge, having been all over the news. The jurors didn't seem particularly moved by the revelation, likely because it wasn't new information.

"Now, please describe the defendant's behavior at that time in detail."

"Um, well, the most striking thing was that he was holding a bloodstained kitchen knife. He also looked… how should I put it… kind of dazed, like he was completely out of it."

"Did he look like someone who couldn't believe what he had just done?"

I slammed my fist down on the desk.

"I request that it be stricken from the record! The question is leading, suggestive, and asking for speculation rather than facts!"

"Sustained."

"I'll withdraw the question. Now, Mr. Yamada (alias), what was the condition of the man who was lying on the ground?"

"Well, it seemed like he was bleeding from his abdomen, and the front of his white shirt was stained red. But it didn't look like there was enough blood for him to die from. At first, I thought he might still be alive. But then I noticed his chest wasn't moving, and I couldn't hear any breathing. That's when I realized, 'Oh, this guy's dead.'"

"Very well. Now let me ask you one final question—one that I'm sure everyone here is wondering. Mr. Yamada (alias), why were you in such a desolate place, a cold riverbank, at night during this time of year?"

It seems Togasaki had also picked up on how unnatural the situation was. As he should have, of course.

Mr. Yamada (alias) suddenly became visibly uncomfortable, scratching his head and folding his arms on the witness stand, as if trying to buy time.

"Mr. Yamada (alias), please answer. It's alright—your privacy is being protected."

"Y-Yes… um, the truth is… well…"

Yamada (alias) continued to hesitate, but under the increasingly stern gaze of the judge, he finally blurted out his shocking answer.

"To put it simply… I prefer men over women."

Crack—it felt like the walls of my world had shattered with a sudden, audible snap.

I can’t even begin to describe the shock I felt in that moment, not even as someone who makes a living from his words.

So that’s it. That explains everything.

Like a snow-covered mountain thawing in the spring, all the doubts I had been harboring started to melt away. Though, to be honest, it wasn’t quite as pretty as that.

Alright. Fine. I suppose that makes sense.

The reason why there were only men in that freezing cold grassy field. That’s what it was.

Why would anyone be in such a desolate, freezing place? No, that’s not the point. It was precisely because it was cold and deserted that they were there.

"In other words, Mr. Yamada (alias), you’re saying you’re gay, and the place where the incident occurred was a spot where gay people gather—a cruising spot. That’s why, despite it being a freezing cold riverbank in the middle of winter, there were still a lot of men around when the scream was heard. Is that correct?"

"T-That’s a bit of an oversimplification! Yes, that’s the reason, but don’t use such a vulgar term as 'cruising spot'! We call that place our 'Favorite Riverside'—a place of hope! Sure, on odd-numbered days it’s mostly men, but on even-numbered days, it’s ladies' day!"

…Huh. So that’s how it is. I had a feeling I should have a heart-to- heart with whoever came up with that 'Favorite Riverside' nonsense.

And those three villains… Why the hell did they dump me in a place like that? Was it just a coincidence? Or was it intentional?

Choosing a deserted riverbank to dump a body isn’t unusual. But in reality, the riverbank wasn’t deserted at all; there were plenty of men hanging around. Of course, they weren’t making a lot

of noise, and they were in the tall grass. So, maybe neither the people dumping the body nor the men hanging around even noticed each other.

Still, I think the people who killed Ebata wanted to pin the murder on me. In other words, they wanted someone to catch me standing next to the body with the knife in my hand. If that's the case, a totally deserted place would have been inconvenient. But if it were a place with a lot of people, there was a risk they'd be caught trying to sneak me and Ebata's corpse into the scene. So perhaps they chose a cruising spot, where there would be people around, but none of them would pay too much attention to others… That's one way to look at it. It's just speculation for now, but it seems plausible.

Anyway, that's as far as my reasoning can take me for the time being. I'll have to pursue the rest through cross-examination.

"No further questions."

"Very well. Defense counsel, your cross-examination, please."

"Understood. Let's get right to it… First, you testified that you heard a scream, correct?"

"Yes."

"For example, let's say, hypothetically, that you were somehow rendered unconscious. When you came to, you found a dead body next to you, bleeding from the abdomen, and in your hand was a bloodstained kitchen knife. In that situation, do you think you could refrain from screaming?"

"Well... I mean, that might be true."

"I found myself in exactly that kind of situation."

"Objection! The defense is not asking questions but simply imposing their own thoughts!"

"That's a misunderstanding, Prosecutor. I'm not stating my thoughts; I'm recounting what actually happened."

"Objection sustained. Defense counsel, keep quiet. At this stage, you are not allowed to say anything other than questions."

The judge issued his heartless ruling. "Keep quiet"? Really, "keep quiet"?

"...Understood. Well then, Mr. Yamada (alias), next, um... let's talk about that cruising spot—"

"It's the 'Favorite Riverside'!"

"My apologies. Let’s talk about the Favorite Riverside. Is that... a well-known spot? I mean, locally."

"No, I don’t think so. Well, maybe if you dig deep enough on the internet, you could find it. But we don’t want the locals to look at us with prejudice, so we’re always careful not to make much noise, and we separate the days for men and women for that same reason."

I see, that makes sense... I think? Well, in that case, it certainly wouldn’t become a widely known rumor like, "That riverbank’s a cruising spot full of guys," I suppose.

"Next question. Let’s say you were at that riverbank. Now, if someone quietly brought a dead body there, do you think you would notice?"

"Well... I’d say it’s pretty difficult. The grass is tall there, after all. And, you know, aside from the sound of the river, the wind constantly rustles through the grass, making quite a bit of noise. That’s exactly why people like it. So, if someone snuck in at night to dump a body, I doubt anyone would notice. Unless there was a scream or something, of course."

That was a convincing argument.

I’ve seen that riverbank myself. Indeed, it would be hard to notice anything in that grassy area.

"And this isn’t just limited to the Favorite Riverside, but I think it’s kind of an unspoken rule at any place where couples gather—you don’t really look at other people even if they pass by. It’s a matter of respecting each other’s privacy, and it’d be rude to pay attention to anyone other than your own partner, wouldn’t it?"

...Makes sense. That’s a good point.

"Thank you, that’s all."

I understood what he was saying. However, as for whether Akamura’s gang—the ones who disposed of the body and me—knew that the riverbank was a cruising spot, that remains a mystery.

If they knew there were men lurking around the area, and that’s why they chose it, then there was still a chance someone could have seen them transporting me and the body, which seems incredibly risky. And if I had woken up and snuck away without screaming, as Mr. Yamada (alias) suggested, it could have ended without anyone noticing.

On the other hand, if Akamura’s gang just happened to choose that riverbank—assuming they picked it because they thought it would be deserted—then that would have given me an opportunity to escape, making it harder for them to frame me for the murder.

Hmm, it's all rather inconclusive. Maybe the most important thing for them was simply to silence Ebata.

Anyway, I've heard everything I needed to for now.

Finally, I decided to ask a question I'd been casually wondering about.

"By the way, isn't it cold? Hanging around a riverbank in the middle of winter?"

"Yeah, it's freezing, to the point where you feel like you're going to die. But... well, you know, don't you get it? We warm each other up."

"...No further questions."

I couldn't help but bail out of that one.

Of course. If you're cuddling with your lover, even a cold riverbank would feel warm.

"The next witness is Inspector Kunio Iwayanagi."

The officer who took the stand, with a perfectly normal name, was none other than the uniformed cop who had been the first to arrive when I woke up next to the body in that grassy field. I could never forget him.

"Mr. Iwayanagi, you were the first officer to arrive at the scene in this case, correct?"

"That's right."

"Could you please tell us how the investigation began?"

"Certainly. First, the emergency call came in around 7:40 PM on January 9th. Since I happened to be patrolling nearby, I rushed to the scene."

"Please describe what happened when you arrived in detail."

...There wasn't much new information in Iwayanagi's testimony.

He testified that he arrived at the scene, found the body, immediately called for backup to handle the situation as a murder case, and, while preserving the crime scene, asked me to hand over the bloodstained kitchen knife I was holding and requested my voluntary cooperation.

Well, as a regular uniformed cop, it didn't seem like much more was expected from his testimony.

"Defense, do you have any cross-examination?"

"No, nothing in particular."

"Then, Prosecutor Togasaki, please call your next witness."

The next person Togasaki brought to the stand was Dr. Eboshi, the medical examiner responsible for the victim's autopsy.

"Dr. Eboshi, you performed the autopsy on the victim's body, correct?"

"Yeh."

"Please provide detailed testimony regarding the condition of the body. First, what was the cause of death?"

"Yeh. First, please take a look at these photos."

The first thing Dr. Eboshi pulled out were two large photographs.

The jurors collectively gasped at the sight. And no wonder—both photos were close-ups of the victim's abdominal wound.

One photo was taken while the victim was still dressed, showing the wound through the bloodstained white shirt. As Yamada (alias) had testified, there didn't seem to be much blood, at least not visibly. It wasn't as though it had pooled on the ground or anything like that.

The second photo appeared to have been taken during the autopsy, after the clothes had been removed, and it showed the wound in all its gory detail. The deep gash was plainly visible, with the surrounding skin discolored in a sickly blackish hue. It wouldn't have been surprising to see some internal organs spilling out—it was not a sight for the squeamish.

"This is a photograph of the fatal wound. It may not be apparent just from looking at it, but the victim was stabbed in the abdomen with a large blade. The cause of death was hemorrhagic shock from damage to the abdominal aorta."

"Dr. Eboshi, can someone really go into hemorrhagic shock just from being stabbed in the abdomen?"

"Absolutely. The abdomen is the center of the human body. There's a major artery running through it to pump blood throughout the entire system. Given the amount of blood pressure in the aorta, once it's damaged, blood gushes out rapidly. In a very short time, the blood pressure drops, the body can no longer circulate blood properly, and the person's bodily functions shut down, causing death. However, as you can see from the photos, there wasn't much external bleeding."

"Why was there so little external bleeding?"

"Well, there wasn't a lack of bleeding as such. It's just that all the blood that spilled from the aorta pooled inside the abdominal cavity—basically, the space that holds the kidneys, liver, and other organs. Had the bleeding continued, it would eventually have spilled out externally, but the body's functions stopped before that could happen, and so did the blood flow."

"Thank you," Togasaki said as he turned to the judge. "Your Honor, I would like to submit the first photo, taken while the victim was still dressed, as Prosecution Exhibit A, and the second photo, which shows the wound directly, as Exhibit B."

"Defense counsel, any objections?"

There was no room for me to object to this.

"... For now, I have no objections. However, as a natural right of the defense, we would like to request a copy of the same photos for examination."

"Very well. I'll ensure that duplicates are made and handed over to the defense later."

"Good. The evidence is accepted."

"Now, back to the questioning. Dr. Eboshi, aside from the fatal wound, was there anything else that caught your attention?"

"Indeed. It appears the victim put up quite a struggle. There were several small cuts around the fatal wound. These cuts showed signs of bleeding. Since there's no bleeding after death, it's likely these wounds were inflicted while the victim was still alive. Also, it seems the victim's arms were restrained when they were stabbed."

"What is the basis for that?"

"Yeh. The victim also had several wounds on their legs that appeared to have been made by a blade. In contrast, there were no significant wounds on the hands or arms. This suggests the victim was only able to resist with their legs against the assailant, which means their arms were likely restrained."

I see. That makes a lot of sense.

The real perpetrators of this case are definitely the group of three. While the ringleader, Akamura, may have an alibi and didn't act directly, there's no doubt there were two others involved. After knocking me out, one of them must have restrained Ebata from behind, while the other stabbed him in the abdomen from the front—that's how it must have gone.

"Was there anything else that caught your attention?"

"Yeh. One more thing: it seems the victim's body was moved after death."

"What led you to that conclusion?"

"When a person dies, gravity causes the blood to pool in the lower parts of the body. This results in dark patches known as livor mortis. However, the pattern of livor mortis on the victim's body appeared to be somewhat dispersed."

"Can you explain what you mean by 'dispersed'?"

"Right, according to the police report, the victim's body was found lying on their back. Naturally, you would expect the livor mortis to appear on the back, buttocks, and thighs, where the body was in contact with the ground. However, in this case, there was no livor mortis on those parts of the back that were directly touching the ground. The blood couldn't pool there because the blood vessels were compressed. On the other hand, livor mortis was present on the back and waist, and the livor on the thighs was unusually faint. Based on this, I deduced that the victim was moved after death. Most likely, they were carried in what's commonly called a 'princess carry.' If the body was carried like that, blood would pool in the back and waist, but not in the thighs, making it difficult for livor mortis to form in the latter."

Ugh, that's kind of unpleasant. In this case, according to them, the one who did the "princess carry" would have been me, the defendant.

"I see, I understand. Now, lastly, based on your estimation, when do you believe the victim died?"

"Well, I performed the autopsy around 9 PM. Based on the body's temperature and the concentration of livor mortis, I estimate the time of death was around 7 PM, two hours earlier. However, considering the body was moved after death, the situation changes. It seems the body was moved from a warm indoor environment to the cold outdoors, which would have

significantly affected the postmortem cooling and rigor mortis. Taking all factors into account... I believe the most reasonable estimate would be between 6:30 and 7 PM."

Yes, that seems reasonable. In this case, I know for sure that the victim was alive until at least after 6 PM. The estimated time of death being around 6:30 is almost certainly correct.

"That's all. Cross-examination."

Togasaki took his seat, and I stood up to begin my questioning.

"Dr. Eboshi, if I'm not mistaken, you said the victim's arms were restrained when they were stabbed in the abdomen, correct?"

"Certainly, that's right."

"Now, let me ask you this: were there any marks on the victim's arms that indicated they were restrained? For instance, rope burns or other such signs?"

"No, there were no such marks."

"In that case, is it possible that the victim's arms were restrained not with ropes, but by someone holding them in a bear hug?"

"Well, that's not necessarily the case. For example, if the arms were tied with a soft material like a towel, it wouldn't leave any marks."

I exaggeratedly shrugged my shoulders. Ah, give me a break.

"Dr. Eboshi, I must say, I have serious doubts about your ability to interpret evidence."

"W-What!? How dare you! I've answered your questions properly, haven't I?"

"No, you haven't answered my question. Let me rephrase it so that you can understand. Can you provide any evidence that disproves the theory that the victim was restrained in a bear hug and then stabbed in the abdomen?"

"Eh..."

Dr. Eboshi suddenly turned pale. Not that his skin wasn't pale to begin with.

"Well, if you put it that way, I suppose I can't disprove it..."

"Good. In that case, if the victim was restrained in a bear hug, then at least two people were involved: one to hold the victim and one to stab them. So, what about this other person?"

"Objection! The question is based on speculation and forces a biased viewpoint!"

"Objection sustained."

"Very well, I'll change the question. Dr. Eboshi, you testified that the victim was moved after death, correct?"

"Yeh."

"And you also testified that the victim was carried in a 'princess carry' style, correct?"

"Yeh, that's right."

"So, you mean to say the victim was carried with their back and waist facing down, correct?"

"Yeh, exactly."

"Then, could it not also be possible that the victim was carried by two people, one holding the arms and the other holding the legs, instead of in a 'princess carry'?"

"Objection! The question forces a biased viewpoint based on speculation!"

"Your Honor, this is different from the previous question. I'm not imposing a biased viewpoint; I'm merely questioning the possibility."

"Objection overruled. The witness will answer the question."

"Eh... Well, I suppose if you're asking whether it's possible, I can't say it's impossible..."

Alright. That's enough for now.

"Very well, that's all."

"Prosecutor Togasaki, any redirect?"

"No, nothing further."

"Then the witness may step down. Please call the next witness."

"Actually, Your Honor, I believe we should conclude today's proceedings here."

At Togasaki's words, the judge glanced at the clock on the wall and, looking slightly surprised, said:

"Hmm. I suppose that’s fine, though it does seem a bit early. The jurors have graciously given us their time, so we should make the most of it whenever possible."

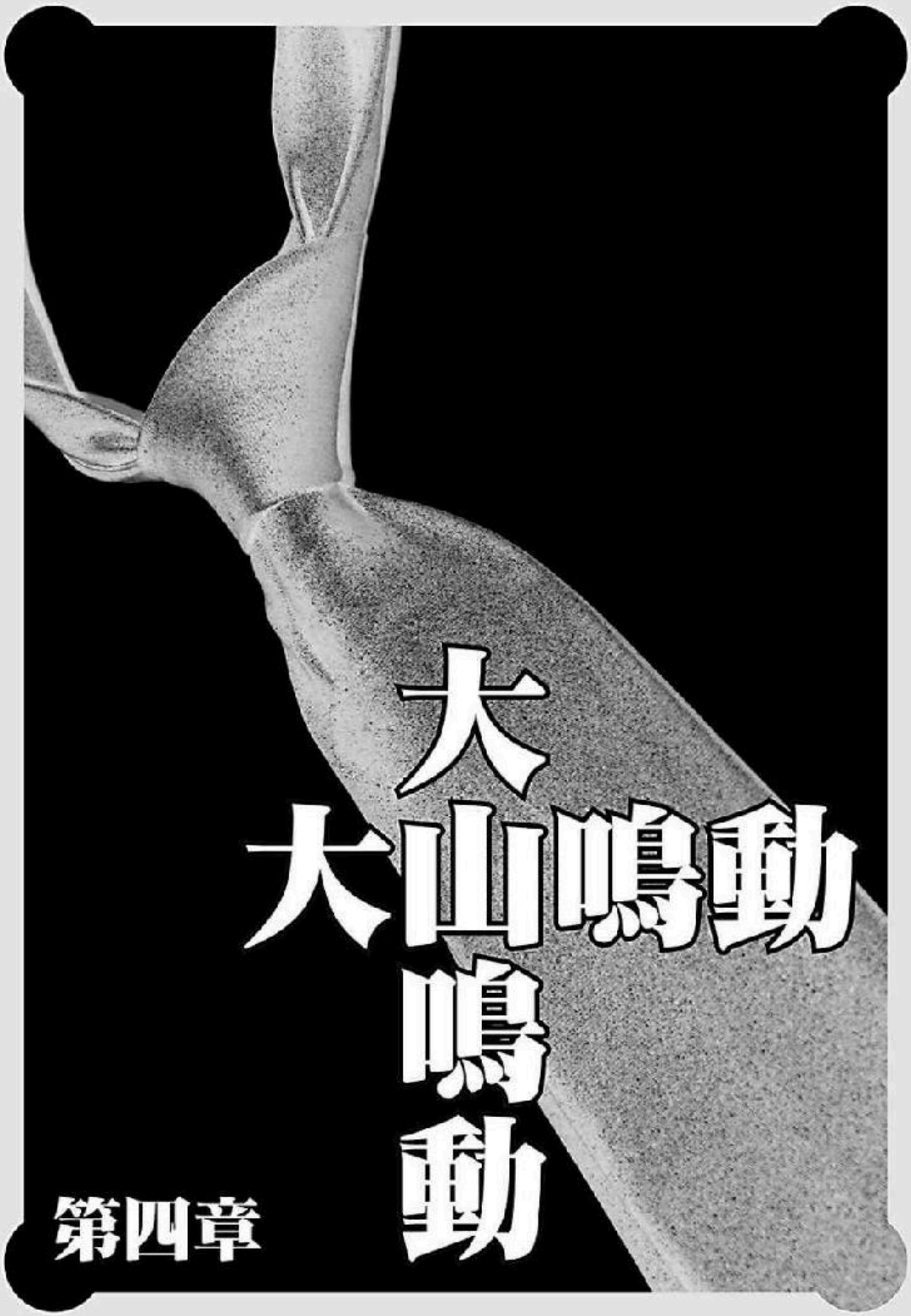
"However, for the sake of presenting our case, this is the ideal stopping point. Moving forward, we plan to present evidence regarding the defendant’s motive for the murder and the circumstances leading to the arrest. These two elements need to be presented together, and doing so will take quite some time. If we start now, we risk overburdening the jury both in terms of time and mental strain."

"...Hmm. I see. Well, that makes sense. We’ll conclude today’s proceedings here, then."

Before I had a chance to raise an objection, the judge had already banged the gavel and adjourned the court. Well, I guess that’s that.

Still, the motive? Why would I have killed Ebata? Neither the police nor the prosecution has told me the reason. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t curious.

Damn, could it be that Togasaki is just dragging this out, not because of time constraints, but simply to torment me?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第四章

Chapter 4: Much Ado About Nothing

January 14th, 10:00 AM, District Courtroom No. 3

"So, Yamashika. Have there been any developments in the investigation?"

In the courtroom, which had reconvened the next day, Takeda, who was seated next to me, opened with that line.

"It's been just one day, you know. There's no way there'd be anything. Besides, we haven't even fully gauged how the prosecution is going to handle things yet."

"I see. Well, do whatever you want. Unlike you, I'm busy. I've got a backlog of work, so ideally, I wouldn't even be here in court. Sorry, but I'm going to prioritize my work."

With that, the delinquent defense attorney pulled out some documents and writing materials from his bag and, true to his word, began working, completely ignoring the trial.

... Well, whatever. I never planned on relying on him from the start anyway.

Soon, the judge entered, and the trial was officially reconvened.

"Our first witness today is Chief Inspector Yutoku Endai."

And so, the trial resumed.

However, the moment I saw the chief inspector take the witness stand as the first witness of the day... I was slightly dumbfounded.

The last time I saw him in the interrogation room, even though he was wearing a tie as a token of formality, his shirt was wrinkled, his hair was messy, and, while somewhat imposing, he looked like a typical rough cop.

But now, what's this? His hair was slicked back with pomade, and he was sharply dressed in an eye-catching bright blue suit. To top it off, his tie was bright red.

I'm not criticizing his taste, mind you. This is a criminal trial where someone's life is on the line, so it's only natural to pay attention to one's appearance.

But—a middle-aged man in a blue suit with a bright red tie... It just seemed like he was trying way too hard. Wasn't there anyone to stop him? Probably not, considering he's the chief.

"Now, please begin by stating your occupation."

"I am the head of the local police department’s criminal investigation division."

"So, you oversee all the detectives, correct?"

"That’s right."

"Chief Inspector Endai, let me ask first: is it common for a chief inspector to personally lead an investigation in the field, as in this case?"

"If you ask whether it happens often or not, I’d have to say no. The role of a chief inspector is to oversee the entire division. However, in this case, the suspect—now the defendant—is none other than the famous Yamashika, a lawyer known for his expertise in criminal trials. If there were any mistakes in the investigation, no matter how minor, they would be picked apart, and the trial would not proceed smoothly. Therefore, to ensure everything was perfect, I, as the highest-ranking officer in the division, decided to take charge of the investigation."

Yeah, right. You just wanted the credit for yourself. I’ll be sure to dig into that in cross-examination, so get ready.

"Now, what time did you arrive at the crime scene by the riverside?"

"It was around 7:45 PM."

"Please describe the scene in detail."

"For the most part, it was as Mr. Yamada (alias) testified yesterday. The scene was by the side of the Tsura River, in a withered, but still tall, patch of grass."

"You thoroughly searched the surrounding area, correct?"

"Yes, we did."

"And did you find anything that seemed related to the crime?"

"Well, that’s the odd part. We didn’t find anything—not even a single drop of blood. So, we began to suspect that the murder itself may have taken place somewhere else."

"In other words, you thought the body was placed in the grassy area to hide it?"

"Yes, that’s what we initially thought."

"Alright, please continue. What did you do next?"

"First, we had the bloodstained knife that the defendant, Yamashika, was carrying, examined."

"Please share the results."

"We confirmed that the fingerprints of the defendant, Yamashika, were on the knife, as well as the victim's blood."

"You have the knife with you now, correct?"

"Yes, here it is."

"Your Honor, the prosecution would like to submit this knife as Prosecution Exhibit C."

"Defense counsel, do you have any objections?"

"... First, I'd like to take a closer look at that knife."

My request was granted, and the red-black stained knife, sealed in a plastic bag, was handed to me.

No doubt about it, this is the knife I had that day. Although my mind was pretty hazy at the time, I don't remember it clearly enough to raise any objections.

In the end, the knife was admitted as Prosecution Exhibit C.

"Now, please testify about the subsequent investigations your team conducted."

"We first identified the victim. From his license, we were able to determine his address, and we also discovered that he was the secretary of a local city council member named Kosuke Akamura."

"We immediately contacted the victim's family and this city council member, Akamura, and searched both his workplace and home. While we didn't find anything of note at the victim's home, we did find several pieces of evidence at Akamura's office, where the victim worked."

"I believe you have brought those pieces of evidence with you today."

"Yes, here they are."

What he produced were a coffee cup in a plastic bag and a set of cotton swabs with their tips stained red, also sealed in plastic.

"Could you first explain the coffee cup?"

"Yes. This coffee cup was found on the table in the office. When we discovered it, there was still a small amount of coffee at the bottom, suggesting it had been used within the past few hours. An examination of the fingerprints and saliva on the cup revealed traces that indicated the defendant, Yamashika, had used it."

Damn, so that's the angle they're taking.

I left traces of myself in that office, and now it's coming back to bite me. "Hindsight is 20/20" never felt more apt.

"Next, please explain the cotton swabs."

"Yes. First, please take a look at this photograph."

Chief Inspector Endai then pulled out a large panel with a photograph on it. It seemed to be a picture of the office floor.

"As you can see, though it may be a little hard to notice, there are several bloodstains on the office floor, both large and small. These cotton swabs were used to collect samples from those stains."

Indeed, there were several bloodstains visible in the photo. Considering how much Ebata apparently struggled when he was killed, it's not surprising that blood splattered everywhere.

"You conducted a DNA analysis on those bloodstains, correct?"

"Yes."

"Please share the results."

"We found DNA from two individuals. To put it simply, the smaller bloodstains in this photograph belong to the defendant, while the rest belong to the victim."

It felt like I'd been hit in the head with a hammer.

Bloodstains? My bloodstains? Why the hell would those be there? I can understand the coffee cup, but I don't remember leaving any bloodstains.

Wait. If I didn't leave them, there's a good chance someone else did. After all, the most logical explanation is that the real culprits—the group of three—injured me while I was unconscious to make it look like I committed the crime.

But this is bad.

The coffee cup could still be dismissed as part of some conspiracy. After all, drinking coffee can happen anywhere. I could claim that my coffee cup was recently stolen from my office. That might just work.

However, finding bloodstains as well makes things a bit more complicated. It's already been said that the victim put up resistance when he was killed. If they claim that I also got injured during that struggle and left behind bloodstains—well, even I might believe that. If it were just the cup, it would be one thing, but even if I said someone stole my blood, the jury probably wouldn't buy it.

"Your Honor. First, I would like to submit this coffee cup as Exhibit D, this photograph of the bloodstains found on the office floor as Exhibit E, and the cotton swabs used to collect the blood as Exhibit F."

"Defense counsel, do you have any objections?"

I considered objecting on the grounds that submitting so many pieces of evidence at once would make it hard to keep track of them all—but that might just make me look incompetent, so I decided against it.

"...No objections. However, I would like to take a closer look at the evidence, just in case."

My request was granted, and soon the three pieces of evidence were passed around.

That said, no matter how closely I looked at these things, it wasn't going to change anything. The coffee cup was definitely the one that had been in Akamura's office that day, and no amount of examining the blood-soaked cotton swabs was going to reveal anything special to me—

...Or so I thought, until I actually took a closer look at the tip of the cotton swabs.

Exhibit F, the cotton swabs. The tip.

It was stained red. That's to be expected, since it was used to collect blood. But perhaps because there hadn't been much blood to collect, the red-stained part was small.

That didn't matter much. What stood out the most was the area right above the red-stained tip. It was faint, but there was a pale yellow stain there.

It was really just a tiny amount. Maybe two or three millimeters at most. But there was no doubt—the cotton swab was tinged with pale yellow.

Why? Why would something like this happen? Was the cotton swab dirty? No, this case is being handled by the chief inspector himself—that kind of basic mistake wouldn't happen...

"Defense counsel, are you done?"

"Huh? Oh, yes."

At the judge's prompting, I reluctantly handed the evidence back.

This was something I'd really like to jump on during cross-examination... but not yet. I need to back it up first.

The fact that they presented such suspicious evidence without any hesitation suggests that neither the police nor the prosecution have noticed the yellow stain, or if they have, they've dismissed it as insignificant.

There's a basic technique in cross-examination: never ask a question if you don't know what the answer will be. Of course, there's also the saying, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained." I tend to ignore basic rules like that, but it depends on the time and place. In this case, if I don't figure out the meaning behind that yellow stain, I won't have any ammunition for a counterattack.

The questioning of Endai continued.

"Now, Chief Inspector Endai, let me confirm once more. You found two sets of bloodstains in the victim's office, and one of them belonged to the defendant, correct?"

"That's right."

"Did you determine from which part of the defendant's body that blood came?"

"Yes, we tried to. Unfortunately, it wasn't possible."

...What? I don't remember them ever asking to examine my injuries.

"Why was that?"

"When we attempted to examine him, the defendant suddenly began injuring himself. He banged his head against the corner of a desk, punched himself in the nose to cause a nosebleed, and even dug his nails into his arm... As a result, it's now impossible to determine which part of his body the blood originally came from."

"O-Objection!"

For once, I couldn’t help but shout, a little too excitedly.

"Your Honor, that testimony is a blatant lie! My injuries were a result of their improper interrogation, not some attempt to cover up unknown wounds!"

"Defense counsel, calm yourself," the judge said, remaining as composed as ever. "It is only natural for the prosecution and defense to present conflicting claims in a trial. However, it is not up to us to determine the truth of those claims; that is the role of the jury. Therefore, the defense’s objection is overruled. That said, the jury is not required to dismiss the defense’s objection from their memory, and may keep it in mind as part of their deliberations."

Damn. Well, for now, I’ll have to be satisfied with that.

But the real problem here is Chief Inspector Endai. Me, injuring myself to cover up evidence? How could he lie so brazenly and with such a straight face? Do you have no pride as an officer of the law, you fraud?

At this point, Togasaki turned not to the witness stand, but to the judge.

"Your Honor, due to the order of proof, I would like to temporarily suspend my questioning of this witness."

"Very well. Defense counsel, you may proceed with your cross-examination."

"Understood."

Heh heh heh. You thought you could make a fool of me and get away with it? I’ll take this opportunity to mess with you a little.

"Now then, Chief Inspector Endai, let me ask you. Typically, you don’t personally lead investigations like this, do you?"

"Well, no, not usually."

"But in this particular case, because a more thorough and careful investigation was required, you took it upon yourself to take charge, correct?"

"That’s right."

"That’s what you say publicly—"

Here, I grinned mockingly.

"—But the real reason is that you wanted to be in the spotlight, isn't it? After all, this case has garnered a lot of attention."

"W-What nonsense!"

It was super effective.

Endai turned as red as his tie and shouted,

"That's outrageous! I simply wanted to do my duty and ensure that no murderer escapes because of a minor investigative mistake!"

"But Chief Inspector Endai, for example, if someone were to wear an outrageous bright red tie to court, wouldn't that be proof that they were trying to draw attention to themselves?"

Apparently, several people in the gallery had been thinking the same thing, and my remark was the last straw. A few stifled snickers rose from the audience.

"W... What do you mean by 'outrageous'! I'm wearing this tie because I didn't want to be disrespectful at a trial like this! It's the same outfit I wore when I proposed to my wife!"

...Oh, I see. So your wife didn't stop you, huh. That's why you can wear such a bright red tie without any shame.

Wait, he's got a wife? This guy? Well, I guess it's not that surprising—he's a civil servant, after all, and a chief inspector at that. Still, as someone who can't even get a proper date, I can't help but feel like it's a bit unfair.

"But here's the thing, Chief Inspector. I'm a lawyer who's given the police a lot of trouble over the years, like some kind of demon. If you could completely crush me, wouldn't that be a huge achievement for you?"

"Objection! The defense is asking malicious questions, clearly intended to unfairly discredit the witness!"

"No, Your Honor. I believe it's important to clarify why someone who should be in a supervisory role, like the chief inspector, has taken such a hands-on role in this particular case."

"...Objection sustained. The witness does not need to answer that question. However, the jury is not required to disregard the defense's question."

The ruling was given.

This trial has been full of moments like this. Well, I guess that's how I've steered it.

"Understood. Now then, let’s move on. Regarding the coffee cup you found at the office of city councilor Akamura, you testified that there was still coffee left in it, correct?"

"That's correct."

"Did you conduct any kind of investigation on the remaining coffee?"

"Yes, of course. We analyzed the residual components."

What? So they did investigate it.

"Please tell us the results. Did you find anything?"

"No, nothing in particular. It was just plain black coffee."

...What?

"Wait a moment. You didn't detect anything?"

"That's what I said, isn't it?"

That’s impossible. I drank that coffee and passed out almost immediately. There’s no way they didn’t find anything.

...No, maybe it’s not impossible. Now that I think about it, there’s no way Akamura and his crew would have left such incriminating evidence untouched. Come to think of it, didn’t Endai say something during his earlier questioning—

"Chief Inspector Endai. How much coffee was left in that cup again?"

"Just a small amount. Only a little bit at the bottom."

Damn. No wonder nothing showed up.

I remember only drinking about half of that coffee. There’s only one explanation: Akamura’s people must have washed the coffee cup that had the sleeping drugs in it. They probably poured in some fresh coffee and rinsed it out. Naturally, only regular coffee would be detected. Of course, they would’ve been careful not to erase my fingerprints or saliva from the cup.

Damn it, maybe I underestimated them. This seems like a far more calculated crime than I thought. If I let my guard down, I could really end up being convicted.

"...No further questions."

"The next witness is Ms. Kotone Kokushima."

The prosecution’s next witness was the girl who had promised to help me, the one who had been the late Ebata’s lover.

As expected, she wasn’t wearing her school uniform today. Instead, she was dressed in a suit, like a student visiting a company for an interview. But still, it’s strange—when you look at her like this, it’s hard to believe she’s a high school student. I can’t tell if it’s because she looks mature or just aged.

"Now, Ms. Kokushima. First, could you explain the nature of your relationship with the victim?"

"Um... we met about two months ago during a volunteer activity. After that, we saw each other from time to time."

"So, in other words, you were romantically involved?"

Kokushima’s carefully worded statement was completely shattered by Togasaki’s bluntness.

"Uh... well, yes, I guess so."

"Alright then, let me ask you this: what kind of person was Mr. Ebata, the victim in this case?"

"He was a very sincere person. He would never deceive anyone, and whenever he saw someone in trouble, he couldn’t help but lend a hand. That’s why I fell in love with him..."

At this point, Kokushima’s voice began to tremble, and she pressed her fingers against her eyes.

"I’m graduating from high school soon. So... we had made plans to go on a trip together. I just don’t understand why this had to happen..."

It was a tearful scene. Some members of the jury were even starting to tear up in sympathy.

At a time like this, it’s probably not appropriate to think, "Is it really okay for a minor to be going on a trip like that?" But for some reason, whenever I see tears in a courtroom, no matter who the witness is, I can’t help but see it as a performance. Is it just me?

"That’s all. Now, Ms. Kokushima, is there anything you’d like to say to the person who killed Mr. Ebata?"

"...I hate them so much, I wish they'd get the death penalty."

"No further questions."

...It's over. What the hell was that?

I can't figure it out. Was that really all? What good does it do to ask questions like that?

Sure, this might've made the jury think less of me. But even if that was the goal, that testimony felt incomplete, like something was missing. It's not like Togasaki to leave things half-baked. Or is there some deeper strategy behind this testimony?

"Defense counsel, do you have any cross-examination?"

The judge looked at me.

Cross-examine, huh... Normally, I should ask Kokushima something like, "Of course, you're angry at the killer, but do you really believe that I'm the one who did it?" That way, she would testify that she doesn't believe I'm the murderer.

However, Kokushima never explicitly said she would support me 100%. If her answer differs from what I intend, it could get very messy. Besides, the reason Kokushima doesn't think I'm guilty is because she knows Ebata was planning to expose Akamura from within, and that I, having never met Ebata before, had no motive to kill him.

But in cross-examination, I can only question things that were brought up in direct examination. If I bring up Akamura at this point, it's a sure bet the prosecution will object.

For now, it's better to wait and see. I responded to the judge.

"No questions at this time."

"The next witness is Mr. Mamoru Iriguchi, a building manager."

Another mysterious witness. A building manager? There hasn't been any mention of a building in this case. What's that hyena trying to pull by calling this witness?

But as soon as I saw the witness walk in, a strange sense of déjà vu hit me. This guy... Have I seen him somewhere before? No, it wasn't recently. It was a long time ago.

"Mr. Iriguchi. Let me start by asking you this: do you know the defendant, Mr. Yamashika?"

"Yes, I do. He had a law office on the second floor of a building I managed."

...I remember now.

This guy used to see me almost every day. He was the building manager of the office where my law firm is located.

"How long did you work as the building manager?"

"Let's see. I quit about six months ago. Before that, I'd been managing the place for about five years."

"So, over those years, were you aware of the people who came and went from Yamashika's law office?"

"Yes, well, it wasn't a building with a lot of foot traffic to begin with. Plus, that law office has been well known for quite a while."

"Could you be more specific? Who exactly was coming and going from Yamashika's law office?"

"Well, let's see... of course, since it's a law office, there were occasionally people who looked like regular clients coming and going, but it wasn't all that frequent."

Give me a break. Of course, my office doesn't get much business.

"Oh, and there was a young man who came and went almost every day. I heard once that he was a private investigator."

"So, Mr. Yamashika was with that young man on a daily basis, correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

"No further questions. Thank you very much."

...What the hell? Again? Why end it there?

Sure, I used to have Kageno coming and going frequently at my office. But so what? What's the connection to my murder charge? I don't get it. I really don't get what he's aiming for.

"Defense counsel, do you wish to cross-examine?"

"...No, I'm fine."

"Very well. Prosecutor Togasaki, please call your next witness."

"Understood. The next witness will be... Mr. Yamada (alias) again."

At this point, a screen was once again placed around the witness stand.

And then, Yamada (alias), wearing a jumper like a suspect, entered the courtroom and took the stand.

What is Togasaki planning to make this witness testify to now, after all that's been established? I'm completely lost.

"Mr. Yamada (alias). Let's start by revisiting the time when you witnessed the victim's body and the defendant together by the riverbank. We've learned from questioning other witnesses that you and your group didn't immediately report it, correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

...Now that I think about it, that did happen. I do remember those guys hesitating to call the police right away, as they were busy discussing something weird amongst themselves.

That's certainly one of the mysteries. Is Togasaki about to reveal the reason now?

"Why? Why did you hesitate to report it?"

"Well… it's because we, well, ended up feeling sorry for them."

…What?

"Mr. Yamada (alias), could you please be more specific? What do you mean by 'feeling sorry'?"

"Well, you see, I hate to say this, but there's absolutely no understanding of homosexuality in Japan. We're constantly subjected to prejudice, and we can't even openly talk about the kind of people we're attracted to. So, well, you hear these kinds of stories often. You know, like, 'Let's run away from this discriminatory world together with the person we love,' that kind of thing…"

"In other words, you thought it was a double suicide?"

"Y-Yes, that's right."

Crack

…I heard it. I definitely heard it. Mixed in with the murmurs of the spectators, I heard a sound like something invisible, something that had been forming the outer shell of my existence, cracking dryly.

“So, the reason you didn’t immediately report the incident was because of this, correct? You thought the defendant and the victim were a homosexual couple, and that they had decided to escape from an unaccepting society by committing double suicide. That’s why you felt sorry for them and hesitated to call the police right away?”

“Y-Yes, that’s right. But please understand this: even so, we couldn’t just overlook a crime, so in the end, we did report it.”

“Of course. Thank you. No further questions.”

“Defense counsel, would you like to cross-examine?”

Hmm. If I don’t cross-examine here, there’s a chance people might get some strange ideas about me. But asking something like, “What made you think I was homosexual?” is a double-edged sword. If by some chance he replies with something vague but damaging like, “Well, it’s because you gave off that vibe,” I’d be the one taking a fatal blow.

…After giving it some thought, I came to a conclusion.

I put on a relaxed smile, maintained an air of confidence, and disregarded the stares of the jury and spectators alike. Even if people called it a bluff, I played it as though I was at ease.

“No, Your Honor, I have no questions.”

No matter what kind of testimony comes out, I’ll just brush it off. For now, this is the best course of action.

Still, I can’t figure out Togasaki’s aim. It seems like he’s been trying to prove that I’m a homosexual from the start...

Homosexuality. Even if same-sex marriage is recognized in some states, or a homosexual politician is elected in some prefecture, in conservative Japan, such tendencies are still not openly accepted, and most people view it with cold eyes.

At this point, whether homosexuality is right or wrong doesn’t matter. I have no intention of criticizing anyone’s preferences, and whether it’s a hobby or a preference, as long as it doesn’t harm others, that’s fine by me.

The problem is that, throughout history, nothing has been more effective at disgracing a person than a sexual scandal. Even if it’s just a baseless accusation. Even a high-ranking politician

from a certain party lost the next election after his cosplay fetish was exposed. Though it later turned out that men without a cosplay hobby were actually in the minority—whether that's the reason or not, he made a comeback in the next election.

In short, even if I win this trial and prove my innocence, if the image of me being a homosexual is cemented, from now on, every time I meet someone, they'll look at me through a strange filter. Could that be Togasaki's true goal? Knowing he can't win the trial, is he trying to drive a wedge between me and Yukina…?

No, that can't be. If Togasaki were that simple-minded, I could turn the situation to my advantage. First, I win the trial, then ban Kageno from my office, marry Yukina, and all suspicions will be cleared in an instant. It's as simple as that.

Still, it's amazing how roundabout Togasaki is in trying to prove something like this. First, he called the murdered Ebata's girlfriend to testify, then the building manager where I live, and now he's suggesting that Ebata and I were romantically involved. None of this has any meaning in a murder trial—

Ah.

…Wait. No meaning? Can I really say that so definitively?

No way. No way, no way, no way!

At that moment, a terrifying thought flashed through my mind.

There's one thing the prosecution has yet to satisfy in this criminal trial.

The motive. Why did I kill Ebata? That reason has not yet been revealed.

Could Togasaki's entire series of absurdities be leading up to that? Could he actually be planning to claim such a horrifying motive…!?

I hope I'm just overthinking this.

But if he's serious… it's terrifying. A chill runs down my spine just thinking about it. At worst, I could end up painted as both a homosexual and a murderer…!

Most likely, everything will become clear with the next witness.

And I can guess who that witness will be—

“Now, we would like to call Chief Inspector Endai once again to the stand.”

I knew it…!

Soon, Togasaki’s first question to the detective, who was now standing at the witness stand with his bright red tie, was as follows:

“Now, Chief Inspector Endai. There is still one thing we haven’t clarified in this trial. That is, the motive behind why the defendant killed the victim. As the lead investigator in this case, I believe you also looked into this matter?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Then, please testify to the facts that were uncovered.”

“First of all, it appears that the defendant, Yamashika, has had homosexual tendencies for quite some time. As Mr. Iriguchi, the building manager, testified, it’s clear from Yamashika’s past preference for spending time alone with a young man.”

...

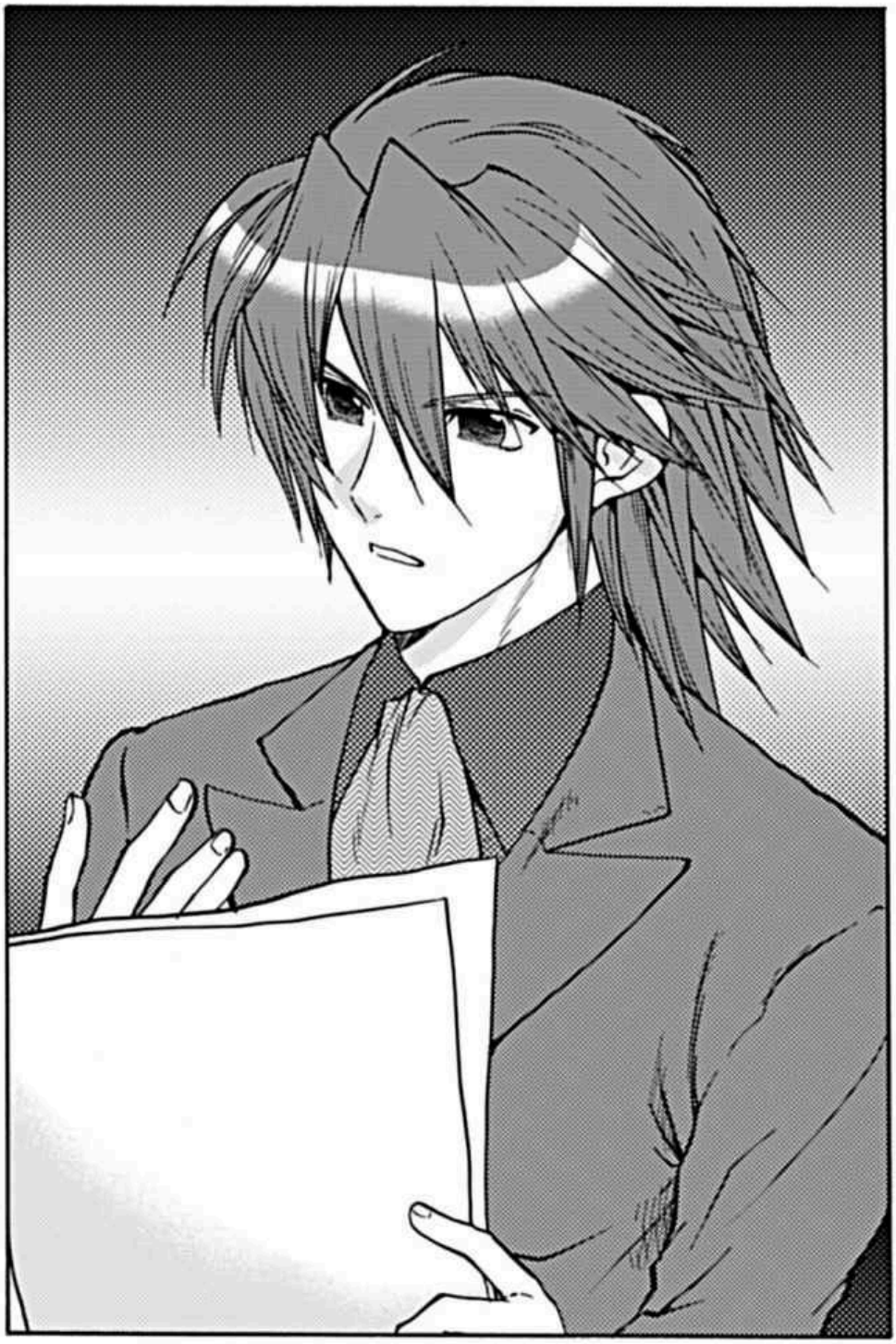
I don’t even have the energy to argue anymore.

“And currently, Yamashika’s partner was none other than the victim, Mr. Ebata. Yes, the victim and the defendant were in love with each other. However, as Miss Kotone Kokushima testified earlier, Mr. Ebata was also dating her. The defendant must have heard this from the victim himself. Or perhaps Mr. Ebata declared that he had chosen Ms. Kokushima over the defendant. It may have even happened at the office of city councilor Akamura. As a result, the defendant, enraged by the breakup, used a knife he had prepared in advance to threaten the victim, tied him to a chair, and eventually stabbed him. Afterwards, the defendant took the body to a deserted grassy area by the Tsura River, either to dispose of it or to commit suicide alongside him.”

...

That damn hyena went and did it.

Okay. Nice joke.



I can’t believe I’ve been treated to such an entertaining story. Has Togasaki finally learned the value of a good sense of humor, the bastard?

So, I killed someone over a messy love affair, huh…! Sure, it was Chief Inspector Endai who investigated, but it must have been Togasaki who instructed the investigation to follow that line of reasoning. That bastard actually has the nerve to make such a ridiculous claim…!

The spectator seats began to buzz.

And about eighty percent of the gazes directed at me were now tinged with something strange. People were glancing at me furtively, as if meeting my eyes would be bad. Incidentally, not that it matters much, but the gender ratio in today’s courtroom was 80% men, 20% women.

Togasaki looked at me, grinning as his lips twisted. Then he turned back to the judge, continuing with an air of complete confidence.

"Your Honor, with this, the prosecution concludes its case. I trust that you now fully understand the motive and the method by which the defendant killed the victim, as well as the sequence of events."

"I see. Very well. However, the cross-examination has not yet been completed. Yamashika, as the defense counsel, you intend to proceed, don't you?"

"Of course, Your Honor."

"Good, then begin."

I slowly stood up, buying some time.

Damn you, Togasaki, what an underhanded case you're building. It’s nothing more than a pile of circumstantial evidence, but the impact is far too strong. A murder driven by a love affair gone wrong, of all things?

This is bad. If I were just the defense attorney and not the defendant, I could put the defendant on the stand and have them boldly declare, "I'm not a homosexual," which might at least partially convince the jury.

But this time, I’m both the defendant and the defense attorney. How many jurors would actually listen earnestly if the defense attorney takes the stand? Damn it, did Togasaki foresee this much? That bastard.

For now, I’ll delay any major counterattacks. I’ll just conduct the bare minimum of cross-examination and push things to tomorrow.

"First, let me ask you, Detective Endai. You said earlier, didn't you, that I killed Mr. Ebata at the office of city councilor Akamura?"

"Yes, I did."

"And why would I need to kill him at the office of city councilor Akamura? Wouldn't it have been safer to do it somewhere more secluded, like by the riverside?"

"Well, the truth of that only you would know, so I can't give a definitive answer. However, as a crime expert, I can offer this hypothesis: You were likely shunned by Mr. Ebata. After all, Mr. Ebata had found a girlfriend, Ms. Kokushima, instead of you, a man. But you couldn't let go of your feelings for Mr. Ebata, so you desperately wanted to see him. Thus, you showed up unannounced at his workplace. But things didn't go as planned, and in a fit of desperation, you committed the crime."

…Grrrr.

It makes perfect sense. How on earth am I supposed to argue against this? Endai is just offering his thoughts, but those thoughts are based on circumstantial evidence, and he's an expert in criminal investigations. Testimony like this is really hard to deal with.

After thinking for a moment, I decided to prioritize getting through this moment.

Suppressing the turmoil in my heart, I raised my index finger and continued calmly, as if explaining something obvious, maintaining a composed demeanor.

"I see. I understand your perspective as a police officer. However, Detective Endai, all of your statements are based on the premise that I am a homosexual, correct?"

"…Well, yes, that's correct."

"So, if that premise collapses, the motive you've presented would collapse as well, wouldn't it?"

"I'd prefer you prove that the premise is wrong before saying such things."

"You're absolutely right. However, it seems that no amount of cross-examination will convince someone as stubborn as you. So, I'll leave disproving that premise for another time and move on to the next question.

Now, Chief Inspector Endai. After I was arrested, I exercised my right as a suspect to request a meeting with a lawyer. But that request wasn't granted until after I was handed over to the prosecution. Doesn't that prove that you intentionally obstructed my right, showing that you had no hesitation in trampling on my legal rights?"

"W-Wait a minute. That’s not true. There’s no evidence that you requested a lawyer. That’s why no lawyer came, and it’s nothing but a baseless accusation to say that we prevented the meeting."

"Oh? Is that so? Then let me ask you this: Can you prove that I didn’t request a lawyer?"

"Objection!"

At this point, Togasaki stood up.

"The defense is trying to confuse the witness with an impossible question! This is like asking the witness to prove that UFOs don’t exist!"

Not to be outdone, I slammed my hand on the desk and said,

"Your Honor! It is the prosecutor who is misdirecting the argument! All I want to do is point out the reasonable doubt in Chief Inspector Endai's testimony!"

"…Hmmm. Objection overruled. The witness will answer the question."

"There you have it, Chief Inspector. Now, let me ask again: Can you prove I didn’t request a lawyer?"

"W-Well, if you put it that way, I can only say no."

"Exactly. Besides, what reason would a suspect have to waive their right to meet with a lawyer? More to the point, given that you’re the kind of detective who resorts to violence during interrogations, I’m sure you didn’t hesitate to block my meeting with a lawyer, did you?"

"Objection!"

"My apologies, I withdraw that statement."

I exaggeratedly shrugged as I spoke. Then I turned back to the judge.

"Your Honor, I have no further questions for this witness. My innocence will be proven through the defense’s rebuttal in the days to come."

"…Very well. Good. That will be all for today’s proceedings."

After giving some instructions to the jury, the judge banged the gavel, bringing today’s trial to a close.

<u>January 14th, 11:12 AM, Yamashika Law Office</u>

"Ahahahahahahahahaha!"

…What greeted me when I returned to the office was the brat's obnoxious laughter.

"Aaahhhahahahaha! That was amazing! That prosecutor Togasaki sure is something! I mean, it's unbelievable! I can't believe they're claiming you killed someone over a love affair!"

"…Shut up. Shut your trap, brat."

In the office were Yukina, Satsuki, and Kageno.

I glared at the brat as I made my way to my desk.

But then, something happened.

Kageno, who had been sitting on the sofa, suddenly shifted away.

He kept glancing at me from the corner of his eye, looking uneasy.

I stopped heading for my desk and took a step toward Kageno.

Kageno stood up from the sofa and took a step back.

I took another step closer. Kageno took another step back.

When I stepped back, Kageno stepped forward.

"…Hey. What kind of joke is this, Kageno?"

"No, it's nothing. Just, Yamashika, I'd appreciate it if you didn't stand behind me for the time being. Please."

"..."

I silently tried to move behind Kageno. He started walking away, trying to avoid me.

For a while, we silently circled the room, two grown men walking around in silence. The women, dumbfounded, were too stunned to even speak.

"…Enough already, Yamashika. Cut it out with the harassment."

"…In this case, who do you think is harassing whom?"

Round and round we went.

"B-But, Mr. Zenko… Could you please just answer one question honestly?"

It was Yukina who stopped our ridiculous chase.

"Hm? What is it, all of a sudden? Sure, ask me anything."

"…Do you really have that kind of… taste?"

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!"

…And so, I spent the next thirty minutes trying to convince the three of them, including Yukina, to clear up this misunderstanding.

But I'm not sure if I succeeded in the end. After all, I wasn't able to finish explaining, because I was interrupted by a visitor who arrived midway through.

It was none other than the late Ebata's lover, Kokushima.

"I'm sorry to bother you when you're so busy. It's just that I couldn't stop worrying about the upcoming trial..."

"No need to apologize. Your cooperation is absolutely essential to us. That said, at the moment, there's not really much I can tell you. We haven't found any significant evidence yet."

"Well, Yamashika, about that—it's not quite true."

Kageno, still keeping his distance from me, interjected.

"What? What do you mean?"

"We've found a collaborator."

This was good news. And in this situation, there's only one thing that "good news" could mean.

"You mean, someone who will testify that Akamura has been subcontracting public works projects?!"

It wasn't me who excitedly asked this—it was Kokushima.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I got a little carried away..."

"No need to apologize."

Well, it’s understandable. She’s probably excited at the prospect of accomplishing what her late lover tried and failed to do.

"So, who is it, Kageno? Who’s the collaborator?"

"Some guy named Minekami, the president of a small company called Daburon."

"I see. Still, Akamura’s managed to get nearly every local construction company on his side, right? How did you find someone like him?"

"Well, looks like they weren’t all as united as we thought. So, what do you want to do? According to him, he doesn’t want to meet anywhere too public."

I stood up. This was our one ray of hope.

"Of course. Let’s go meet him right away. Kokushima, I’m sorry to cut this short, but you’ll have to excuse us for now."

"Oh, I understand. I’d just get in the way if I stayed. Please, don’t worry about me."

"Thank you for saying that. And one more thing—if our collaboration with this person goes well, we’ll finally be able to strike back. I’d like you to testify as early as tomorrow. Would that be alright? I’d like you to talk about how Ebata was trying to expose Akamura’s corruption."

"Yes, that’s fine."

"Good. I appreciate it. I’ll see you at court tomorrow. Yukina, could you at least make her some tea before she leaves?"

"Yes, I’ve got things at the office covered."

"Alright, let’s go, Kageno."

"Yeah, yeah."

And so, leaving the three women behind, I hurried out of the office. Naturally, Kageno still refused to walk in front of me.

Damn you, Togasaki. Did you really foresee everything up to this point when you built your case...?

◆

The truth is, I've become somewhat of a public figure. If I carelessly go outside, the press will swarm me. That would be inconvenient for our collaborator as well, so I had no choice but to follow Kageno's advice. I put on sunglasses and we took a taxi to meet this collaborator of ours. The meeting place wasn't a café or anything like that—it was in a secluded park on the outskirts of town.

The man who eventually showed up was someone you could describe as middle-aged, though it seemed like it was a bit too late to call him that. His face was pale, and most of his hair had turned white. His sunken chin was dotted with unshaven stubble. He looked like someone who had been through a lot.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Kaika Minekami, president of Daburon Ltd."

His greeting was humble, fitting for the president of a small company. Still, his name sounded like something out of a mahjong game.

"You must be Mr. Yamashika. I've heard about you. I've despised Akamura for subcontracting public works through dummy companies. I believe I can be of some help."

"That's great to hear. But from what we've been told, most of the local construction companies are benefiting from Akamura's deals and wouldn't dare oppose him. So why are you willing to help?"

"Well, that's true for most companies, but not all of them. Our company may be small, but we're still qualified to bid for public works contracts. The problem is, those guys keep taking the few contracts there are at rock-bottom prices. When even one company does that, it makes things tough for the rest of us. I can't say it too loudly, but we can't even collude at this rate."

I see. It's true—you can't rig bids unless all the companies are in on it. Well, bid-rigging is a problem in and of itself, but fixing society isn't exactly my top priority right now.

"So, you're willing to cooperate with us?"

"Yes, gladly. However, I'm not sure how much help I can be. After all, I don't have any concrete evidence of the subcontracting."

That's understandable. If someone from another company had such evidence lying around, Ebata wouldn't have resorted to breaking into an office and robbing a safe.

"I understand. Don't worry—circumstantial evidence will be more than enough. If you can testify that it's common knowledge in the industry that Akamura's been subcontracting public works through dummy companies, that's all we need."

"Oh, if that's all, that should be easy."

If we combine that circumstantial evidence with Kotone Kokushima's testimony, we'll be able to show what Ebata was trying to accomplish. In other words, we'll be able to draw Akamura out as a suspect. Once we get him on the witness stand and grill him, we'll likely uncover even more.

"By the way, Mr. Yamashika, I have one more favor to ask."

Minekami lowered his head as he spoke.

"And what would that be? If it's something I can do, I'd be happy to help."

"Well, it's definitely risky. Akamura is indeed securing public works contracts and spreading the profits to the local community. If it comes out that I interfered with that, my company could be ostracized from the industry. So, um, I was at today's trial, and you remember there was someone who testified behind a screen to protect their privacy, right? I'd like to do the same when I testify."

"That's a simple enough request. The prosecution already allowed it once, so they won't be able to refuse us if we ask for the same."

"Thank you so much. In that case, I'll have no issues."

After that, we discussed the details of his testimony and then went our separate ways.

Alright. Honestly, I felt a chill down my spine when we couldn't find any evidence, but it seems that, in the end, justice prevails. Little by little, everything is falling into place. The signal for our counterattack has finally been lit.

Just you wait, Togasaki. I'm going to make you eat your words.

第五章
父撃の狼煙は所詮煙

Chapter 5: The Smoke Signal of Counterattack Is, After All, Just Smoke

January 15th, 10:00 AM, District Courtroom No. 3

"Now, we will resume the trial. Defense counsel, are you ready?"

"Yes, of course."

When I answered, the judge nodded.

"Very well. Who is the defense's first witness?"

"First, I would like to call Ms. Kotone Kokushima to the stand."

Just like yesterday, Kokushima, dressed in a suit, took the witness stand.

Strange. She's giving off a completely different impression from yesterday. Her movements, her expression—everything seems more mature. Could it be that the death of her lover is finally taking its toll on her? But even so, she looks far too grown-up to be a high school student.

Well, that's not important. I need to focus on the questioning.

"Now then, Ms. Kokushima. You had a very close relationship with the victim, Mr. Hiroshi Ebata, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Yesterday, you testified that you hate the perpetrator so much you wish they'd get the death penalty. Let me ask you this: do you think I am the perpetrator?"

"Well… I can't say for sure."

What the hell is that!? I was hoping for a clear "no" here... So, she hasn't completely let go of her suspicions about me.

Fine, I should still be grateful that she left some room for doubt. Let's move on to the main issue.

"By the way, you know that Mr. Ebata was trying to expose a certain city councilor before he died, as in whistleblowing, right?"

The courtroom stirred slightly. The combination of “whistleblowing” and “city councilor” must have struck a nerve.

But it’s too soon to be surprised. The real shock will come when you hear Kokushima’s answer.

"...No, I’m not sure about that."

"What!?"

What did she just say!? How could she not testify to that!?

Damn it, I can’t lose my cool. I turned back toward the judge, trying to maintain my composure.

"Uh, Your Honor, may I have a moment? I need a little time."

"…Very well. But be quick about it."

Ignoring the murmurs among the courtroom spectators, I rushed over to the witness stand and whispered urgently.

"Hey, what’s going on here? Why did you say you didn’t know?"

"...I’m sorry. I really am. I came here today intending to testify, but before the trial started, I had a chance to speak with Mr. Minekami, and that conversation made me unsure."

"...What?"

She talked to him? But why would that change things so drastically?

"At first, I didn’t think you were the killer, but… I don’t know anymore. I can’t help but doubt you now. I know this sounds selfish, but… please, clear your name without me. I’m begging you."

What the hell is this?

What just happened? All she did was talk to Minekami, the man who was supposed to help us pin down Akamura. How could that change her mind so much?

"Defense counsel, are you still not ready?" That snide remark didn’t come from the judge—it was from Togasaki. "It seems like you’re having trouble communicating with your witness. Perhaps the reason no lawyer was willing to take your case is because you have a problem getting along with others?"

The gallery burst into quiet laughter. Damn fools.

"Prosecutor Togasaki, that’s enough."

"Yes, I apologize. I won’t do it again."

Though the judge reprimanded him, the look in his eyes when he turned to me clearly said, "Hurry it up, you idiot."

Damn it, I don’t have a choice. I leaned in close to Kokushima and whispered.

"You won’t change your mind?"

"...No. I’m sorry."

"Damn it. Fine, do as you please. But I have a job to do. No matter how you answer, I’m still going to ask you all my questions."

"..."

Kokushima lowered her head and said nothing.

I turned back to the judge.

"My apologies, Your Honor. But after speaking with the witness, it seems she’s harboring some hostility toward me, the defense counsel, likely because she was originally a witness for the prosecution. Therefore, I’d like to request permission to conduct leading questions."

"Given the circumstances, I’ll allow it."

"Thank you."

If I let this witness leave without doing anything, it would look terrible. I have to press forward somehow.

"Now then, Ms. Kokushima. You came to my law office the day before this trial began, didn’t you?"

After a brief hesitation, Kokushima answered.

"...I don’t remember."

So, you’re going to deny it that much, huh? Fine.

"Very well. But my office building has security cameras. It’ll be easy to confirm the truth. Did you notice the camera installed in the ceiling?"

"...No."

"I see. So, you did come to my office, but you didn’t notice the camera?"

"...Oh. No, that’s not what I meant…"

She’s floundering. For the record, our office doesn’t actually have a security camera—though that’s just between you and me.

"That proves you came to my office. Now, at that time, you said this to me, didn’t you? You said you didn’t believe I was the killer, because there was someone else who had a motive to kill Mr. Ebata."

The courtroom stirred slightly.

"...No, I don’t remember saying that."

"Really? But I was arrested on suspicion of killing your lover. If you came to see me, it must have been because you had something you really wanted to say, or because you were out for revenge, wasn’t it?"

"Objection! This isn’t even a leading question anymore—he’s just forcing his own opinions on the witness!"

"Overruled. But defense counsel, be more careful."

"Understood."

Damn it, these people are so noisy.

"Let’s change the question. At that time, you also told me this, didn’t you? You said Mr. Ebata was planning to expose corruption in this city, and that the real culprit must be those who stood to lose from that exposure."

Murmur... *murmur*...

The spectators couldn’t stay silent after hearing that. The judge’s eyebrows twitched slightly.

"...I don’t remember."

"Let me remind you, then. You told me there’s a city councilor named Kosuke Akamura who’s been using dummy companies to subcontract public works and pocket illegal profits. That’s what you said, isn’t it?"

MURMUR MURMUR MURMUR MURMUR!

"Silence! Silence in the court! You two over there! Yes, you, the ones pointing at yourselves! You've defied this court's order to remain quiet and disrupted the proceedings. Bailiff, remove them from the courtroom… Alright, it seems we've restored order. Defense counsel, proceed."

"Your Honor, if I may!"

At this point, the prosecutor, like a hungry hyena, stood up from his seat.

"The defense is introducing baseless, completely irrelevant conspiracy theories that have no connection whatsoever to this case! I demand that all of the defense's statements be struck from the record!"

I couldn't back down here.

"With all due respect, Prosecutor Togasaki, this is not baseless. I'm simply bringing up what this witness told me earlier."

"Hmph, it's easy to twist words, isn't it? You've repeatedly fabricated nonsense in the past to disrupt trials, and when you're told you have no evidence, you have no qualms about forging it! I'd appreciate it if you'd stop trying to twist the argument and deceive us!"

"Hah, that's amusing! If you're going to go so far as to slander my name, I'd like you to explain clearly for me! Falsifying evidence, you say!? When have I ever done such a thing!? What year, what month, what day, what hour, what minute, what second? How many times has the Earth rotated since then!?"

"Are you a child!? Very well, I'll tell you! On December 27th of last month, at 2:15:30 AM! The Earth had rotated 4,895,836,861 times!"

"Hah! It seems you have a wild imagination! What makes you think you can spout such absurd numbers?"

"Amusing! If you're going to call it nonsense, then prove that the Earth hasn't rotated 4.8 billion times!"

Just as the argument was heating up—

"Silence, the both of you————!!"

...The air shook.

Yes, the very atmosphere trembled.

The Hyena and I, both at a loss for words, timidly glanced over at the judge.

There, as if a tectonic shift had occurred unnoticed, was a volcano about to erupt, magma threatening to burst forth at any moment.

"You two… To think you could bicker so pathetically. It's beyond ridiculous, I'm actually impressed."

"…We are honored by your praise, Your Honor."

"I wasn't praising you——!!"

"S-Sorry!"

Damn it. I couldn't bear the silence and opened my mouth without thinking.

"Enough. I don't even want to waste the time it would take to charge you both with contempt of court! I will now deliver my ruling. As for the prosecution's objection from earlier—"

For some reason, the judge trailed off here.

"As for the objection…"

Several seconds passed. The silence was unbearably awkward.

And yet, the judge's face remained as serene as a Buddha's.

But then, with a sudden bang, he slammed his gavel on the desk.

"Look at this! Because you two kept going off-topic, I've forgotten what the objection was even about!!"

Isn't that just you venting your frustration!?

...For the next minute, while the judge reviewed the records, the courtroom was enveloped in complete silence.

Next time this guy is presiding as judge, I'm definitely filing a request to have him removed. The reason? He's senile.

"...Alright, I remember now. I'll ask the defense counsel, Mr. Yamashika. Regarding this matter of subcontracting public works, does it have a direct connection to this case?"

"Of course, Your Esteemed Honor."

I mimicked that time when Togasaki called the judge "Your Esteemed Honor."

"You mentioned an individual's name during this session. If you cannot prove a connection, you could be sued for defamation. Are you aware of that?"

"Yes, I fully understand."

"Then naturally, you will be able to provide evidence?"

"We will hear that from the witnesses I'll be calling next."

"Very well. Then I will withhold my ruling on the prosecution's objection until then."

"Thank you very much. With that, I will conclude my questioning of this witness."

"Very well. Prosecutor, do you have any cross-examination?"

"No, Your Honor."

Togasaki bowed gracefully, though it was clearly exaggerated.

"I believe the defense's questions were nothing more than baseless delusions being forced onto the witness. As the witness has testified, they don't remember any of it. Therefore, I see no need to cross-examine."

This guy is as insufferable as ever. Fine, I'll throw some sarcasm his way for once. I put my hands on my hips and turned to face Togasaki directly.

"Excuse me, Prosecutor Togasaki, but could you kindly say the words, 'I will testify to the truth and nothing but the truth'?"

"...What? What are you talking about?"

"If you wish to speak on behalf of the witness, I believe you should first make an oath."

This tactic worked, as I managed to make Togasaki's face twitch, but it also earned me another angry glare from the judge.

In any case, I'd managed to get through this round. I'd successfully brought up the name of Akamura, the mastermind behind all of this.

However, that's only the beginning. Unless I can provide evidence that Akamura orchestrated the illegal subcontracting of public works, all of my testimony will be stricken from the record.

Which brings us to the next step.

"The defense calls Mr. Kaika Minekami as the next witness."

Finally, Minekami took the stand. He had requested that we respect his privacy, but I ignored that now. Furthermore, Minekami no longer seemed concerned about showing his face as he stood at the witness stand. It was as if his very presence there confirmed that he was a traitor.

However, Minekami seemed quite agitated. He kept glancing at me, then quickly looking away with a guilty expression. I guess, in the end, he's just the president of a small company—not used to deceiving people. Or maybe, he's feeling guilty about betraying me. It's hard to say which way this will go.

In any case, Minekami is the bigger problem here, more so than Kokushima.

Kokushima said this man had whispered something to her. As a result, her testimony became the mess that it was. In other words, Minekami isn't on our side—he's the enemy.

Unfortunately, it's not entirely surprising. Perhaps I was too fixated on finding witnesses who would support me. It's very possible Akamura and his cronies picked up on that and made their move. It's the classic "poison in the well" strategy.

Letting a man like this take the stand means anything could happen. Still, nothing ventured, nothing gained. There's something that's been bothering me. I've sparred with enough witnesses over the years to learn how to spot a lie or two, and yesterday when I met with him, he didn't give off even the slightest hint that he was up to something. There's still a chance he might cooperate with me.

Then again, I could just be so desperate for an ally that my judgment is clouded…

Well, no matter. At this point, the only way I can prove the subcontracting scheme is real is by getting testimony out of this guy.

"Now then, Mr. Minekami. Could you please start by introducing yourself?"

"Yes. My name is Kaika Minekami, and I am the president and CEO of Daburon Ltd."

"You are aware that Mr. Kosuke Akamura, a city councilor, has been leading a scheme to illegally subcontract public works projects, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not aware of that. In fact… well, I don't believe a man like him would do such a thing. It's outrageous to accuse him of that."

Damn it, I knew it. He's completely against us.

But his tone is clearly shaken. Maybe there's still a sliver of guilt lingering in him.

"However, yesterday, you clearly told me that the city councilor Akamura was involved in this subcontracting scheme, didn't you?"

"Well, yes, I did. But, I'm sorry… that was a lie."

"W-Why would you need to lie about something like that?"

"That's because, well, you see, you've got it all wrong. The city councilor Akamura is a wonderful person. Far from committing any fraud, he's actually been securing many public works projects from the government, providing us with jobs and enriching our community. When I heard you were trying to frame such a good man as a villain, I just couldn't stand by and do nothing. So, yes, I decided to secretly help him in this way."

What the hell…!

He's completely turned against me. Unlike Kokushima, this guy will shamelessly spout falsehoods as if they were facts. Even if I had a tape recording of our conversation from yesterday, he'd probably counter with, "That was just nonsense to deceive you and make you trust me."

It's over. I'm trapped. There is no way for me to present any evidence that Akamura had been outsourcing public works projects.

With things as they are, there is only one option left for me.

I silently turned to the judge.

"Your Honor, may I say something?"

"...What is it?"

"Well, how about we adjourn today's session for now?"

January 15th, 11:50 AM, Yamashika Law Office

It's probably because of what happened earlier.

Naturally, Kotone Kokushima was no longer in the office. The only ones here were Yukina, Satsuki, and—

"...Yamashika, I know you've got something to say to me. But could you stop standing behind me and glaring at me like that?"

...I silently walked around to face Kageno.

"Damn it, Kageno! This is your fault! You're the one who brought that witness, and now we're in this mess!"

"Yeah, I get it. I feel somewhat responsible too. But you know, I still can't believe it. You're the one who hired me, so I've been following your lead."

"My lead? What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean, you always assume everyone's a thief until proven otherwise."

Yeah, yeah, whatever. Not that you're wrong.

"...What are you trying to say?"

"Here's the thing. I did a full background check on Minekami, obviously. I looked into the financial state of his company, Daburon, where he's the president. There's no doubt his company took a massive hit due to the public works being outsourced under Akamura's leadership. It wouldn't have been strange for him to side with us."

"But in the end, he still betrayed me, didn't he?"

"...Yeah, I know. His company is on the verge of bankruptcy, so maybe Akamura exploited that weakness to turn him against us. Still, even if that's the case, it's not like I can be held responsible for something like that."

Tch, the nerve of this guy to act like it's not his problem.

"Damn it, fine."

Frustrated, I ran my fingers through my hair.

It’s true, there’s no point in blaming Kageno here.

For what it’s worth, I don’t think there were any holes in Kageno’s investigation, and when I met with Minekami, he didn’t seem like the type who could lie so thoroughly—he seemed like a man who’d grovel if pushed. He didn’t look like someone who would deceive us.

And yet, Minekami betrayed us without hesitation. Why?

...No, wait. Maybe I’ve been misunderstanding something. It’s possible that Minekami didn’t intend to work against us from the beginning, but that his attitude shifted drastically between last night and this morning. Otherwise, his attitude yesterday doesn’t make sense.

In the end, humans are easily swayed by their desires. Especially when their company is in dire straits, morals take a back seat, and profit becomes the priority.

Even if Minekami had exposed Akamura’s illegal outsourcing of public works, it wouldn’t necessarily have led to a profit. It would’ve been more lucrative for him to pretend to be on my side while secretly offering his services to Akamura, saying, "I could betray him for the right price."

In other words, Minekami had plenty of reasons to betray me. I was a fool to trust him.

"But, Mr. Zenko, what are we going to do now? If you can’t bring up the public works outsourcing, isn’t it going to be really hard to drag Akamura into court…?"

Yukina couldn’t hide the anxiety on her face.

It’s not like this is the first time I’ve been in a tough spot, so seeing her so worried makes it a bit awkward for me.

"Yeah, but there’s nothing we can do now. Ideally, I wanted to haul Akamura into court and get him to admit to both the public works outsourcing and Ebata’s murder during questioning, but... that’s not going to happen. So, we’ll put the outsourcing issue on hold for now. First, we need to focus on winning this trial."

"Oh, right!" Satsuki exclaimed, clapping her hands excitedly. "That’s what’s important, isn’t it? As long as you’re acquitted, who cares about avenging Ebata, right?"

"Shut up."

Still, Satsuki’s right. Even if we can’t drag Akamura into this, as long as I can prove my innocence, I’ll be able to get through this trial.

For now, I'll have to set Akamura aside and focus on sorting out the current situation.

The prosecution's case concluded today, and all the evidence they have to pin me as the culprit is now on the table. It boils down to three things: one, I was found near the body; two, I was holding a bloodstained knife; and three, my blood, along with Ebata's, was found in Akamura's office. The motive is irrelevant for now—it's too absurd to even consider seriously.

The first and second points still leave room for maneuvering. If I can prove that I was framed, and that when I woke up, I was already in that position, I might have a chance. I could call in Chief Inspector Endai as a witness and ask,

"Are you aware that I was drugged and asleep, and that when I woke up, I was next to the body?"

That's one possible strategy. The problem, though, is that I have no way to prove it. If only there were some trace that I'd been drugged… but without that, it'll just sound like a flimsy excuse. I need some kind of corroborating evidence.

The bigger issue, however, is the bloodstains they found at the crime scene. As long as those exist, claiming I was framed will sound like nothing more than a desperate criminal's excuse.

On the other hand, if I can somehow discredit the bloodstains, it would open up a lot of room for reasonable doubt. But the most frustrating part is that I don't even know why my blood was in that office in the first place. How the hell am I supposed to undermine the existence of that evidence…?

...Wait a minute.

I'd almost forgotten, but there was one thing that caught my attention. Prosecution Exhibit F, the cotton swab that was used to collect my bloodstains—there was a yellow liquid on it. If something seemed suspicious, it was that. But the problem is I don't know what's so suspicious about it.

I have no choice. I'll have to ask an expert for help. It's his turn.

I don't like having to rely on him every time, but right now, I've got no other choice.

"Yukina, I'm heading out for a bit. Hold down the fort."

"Understood. But, where are you going?"

"I'm going to pray to a god for help."

◆

"...So, you came to see me, huh? What a nuisance. This is going to mess with my daughter's education, you breathing ball of bad news."

"...Don't talk about me like I'm some pervert."

"What, you didn't realize that about yourself?"

"..."

This man with a mouth as foul as Togasaki's or Takeda's is Kudoku Ujigami (his surname written as in "guardian deity"). He's a coroner by profession, and he's far more knowledgeable about dead bodies than living people—a total quack of a doctor.

Just then, a loud wail erupted from the baby in Ujigami's arms.

"See? You made my daughter cry. This is your fault."

"...It's my fault?"

"Tch. Just go over there for a bit. There, there, li'l Iori, there's nothing to be scared of. The weirdo is gone now. Bloop bloop blooop~"

"..."

I couldn't help but hold my head in my hands. To think my last hope is this guy.

Eventually, Ujigami handed his still-crying daughter over to his wife and came back over to me.

"Still, it makes me sad to know that I'm acquainted with a murderer like you. Why did you even come to my house? If the neighbors see you, they'll start giving me strange looks."

"Shut up. Don't call me a criminal until the verdict is officially decided."

"Fine, fine. So, what brings you here today, potential killer?"

...At least he seemed willing to listen, so I began to explain.

I told him the sequence of events that hadn't yet been made public. How Ebata had come to me looking for protection after blowing the whistle, and after a series of events, I woke up with a bloodstained knife in my right hand and a corpse in front of me. I also told him about the key points of the prosecution's case that I'd learned from the trial so far. For good measure, I handed him a complete set of photos of the dead body that I'd snatched from the prosecution.

"Hmm. So this time it’s a stabbing, huh? Always with the variety. I’ll never run out of forensic material with you around."

Ujigami was staring at the photos with great interest.

I doubt there’s anyone else in the world who’d consider photos of a corpse a gift.

"So? After hearing my story, does anything stand out to you?"

"Yeah, there are one or two things."

"There are? Two things?!"

The saying "turn to your guardian deity in times of trouble" seemed to be true.

"You said the victim was stabbed with a knife, right?"

"Yeah. After all, I was holding a knife covered in the victim’s blood."

"Well, that’s strange. Take a look at this photo."

He pointed to a close-up of the wound on Ebata’s abdomen, the fatal injury. It was the kind of gruesome wound where you’d expect to see organs spilling out.

"What about it? What’s strange?"

"Look at the area around the wound. It’s dark and looks like a bruise, doesn’t it?"

"Hmm?"

Sure enough, just like Ujigami said, it was dark.

"It does look like that... but didn’t the victim suffer a fatal wound? I don’t know, but wouldn’t that leave a mark like this?"

"No, if it was a sharp blade like a knife, it wouldn’t leave a bruise like that. Listen, this black area around the wound is definitely a bruise. The murder weapon probably wasn’t a knife; it was something with a wider blade. I’d say it was a long, heavy knife. When you stab human skin with a wide blade like that, it bruises the area around the wound."

"I... I see."

I could picture it. A thin blade like a kitchen knife would just cut through the flesh, but something thicker, like a hunting knife, would not only cut but also put pressure on the surrounding area, causing the small blood vessels under the skin to burst and form a bruise.

"...Hey, wait a minute."

At that moment, I realized something huge.

"This is serious! Are you saying the knife I was holding when I woke up wasn't the murder weapon? That means there's a different murder weapon that killed Ebata!"

"Whoa, don't jump to conclusions. I'm just saying it's a possibility. Even if the victim was stabbed with a knife, if they struggled, the blade could have twisted and caused bruising around the wound. Besides, the prosecution already concluded that the knife was the murder weapon, right? They must've had some basis for that."

"Who cares what the prosecution thinks? All I need is to create room for a reasonable doubt."

That said, it's not going to be easy to bring this up in court right away.

It's already been established that Ebata put up a strong fight. Just as Ujigami said, it's possible that the bruising could have been caused by the knife even if it was the murder weapon.

But if we could find this other murder weapon, my innocence would be certain...

"Well, if you're satisfied with that, fine. But there's one more thing that caught my attention from your story."

"Right, you said there were two things. Spill it. What is it?"

"The part where you said you were drugged and left unconscious by the river. You're lucky you're still alive."

"What's that supposed to mean? I've got a knack for survival. I managed to avoid freezing to death and live through it."

"That's not what I mean. Sure, freezing to death was a possibility, but I'm more worried about the drug. I don't care what TV dramas say, but even as a doctor, I can't think of any drug that knocks someone out in just ten minutes."

His unexpected comment made me blink in surprise.

"...Really?"

"Yeah! Maybe if it were injected or inhaled, or combined with alcohol, I could understand it. But you drank it in coffee, right? Being knocked out in ten minutes from something ingested orally? I'd guess you were given some kind of antidepressant, but even that wouldn't knock you out in just ten minutes. It must've been an incredibly strong dose. You're lucky to be alive. You could've ended up in a coma and died. At that point, it's not even a drug—it's poison."

...Coming from a qualified doctor saying it with a straight face, it sent a chill down my spine.

"...Hearing that makes it a bit more terrifying."

"Yeah, I bet. And then you were left outside? In this freezing January? The fact that you didn't freeze to death and woke up in about an hour is nothing short of a miracle, if you ask me."

...I see. So I was that close to death.

In dramas and manga, people always get knocked out so easily, I never really questioned it...

I guess this is just the luck of the draw. My love life is always at rock bottom, so maybe my good luck gets redistributed elsewhere.

"Still," Ujigami continued, "if that's the case, you should've had a urine sample taken. That could've proven you were drugged. And with a lethal dose at that."

"...Damn it."

I cursed from the depths of my heart. That would've been valuable evidence showing I was almost killed. What a waste. What a damn waste.

"Hey, Ujigami. Even though some time has passed, is there any chance something would still show up in a urine test?"

"Huh? Well, some drugs do leave traces for a long time... but it's hard to imagine a fast-acting drug that knocked you out in ten minutes would still be in your system after several days. Besides, you're out on bail now, not locked up, right? You could've taken any drug since then. Even if you did a test now, nobody would believe it."

"...Yeah, you're right."

I was about to give up but then reconsidered.

Wait. They didn't take a urine sample, but...

"What about my blood? After I woke up by the river, I was taken to the police station, and they drew my blood. Couldn't there still be traces of drugs in that?"

"Hmm. It’s not impossible, but... how long were you unconscious?"

"About an hour. From around 6:30 PM to 7:30 PM."

"And when did they take your blood?"

"Just before midnight, around 11:00."

"I see... That’s a tricky one. Listen, the fact that you woke up means the drug’s effect had worn off. Drugs, whether ingested or injected, work by being absorbed into the bloodstream and affecting the body. So it’s possible that traces could remain in your blood, but over time, those chemicals break down and are eventually expelled from the body. If the drug’s effects wore off after an hour, then a lot of it would’ve already metabolized by then. And three hours later... well, it’s hard to say. There might be some traces left, but we don’t even know what drug you were given."

It seemed like my hopes were slim.

"To begin with, aren’t you being accused of killing someone after a lover’s quarrel? Even if traces of sleeping pills are found, wouldn’t they just assume you were trying to commit double suicide?"

"Ugh. Y-Yeah, I guess…"

That was certainly a possibility. That I killed the one I loved, Ebata, with my own hands, and then took sleeping pills to try and end my life too—exactly the kind of argument Togasaki would love. No joke, he would really make that claim.

Damn it, forget about the drugs for now. It’s not like all hope is lost.

"Hey, quack doctor. I have another question about blood. What happens to bloodstains if they’re exposed to the air for a while?"

"They get sticky, and coagulate. And if left long enough, they’ll eventually dry up and become crusty."

"So, if you were to take a sample of that blood with a cotton swab, could the swab turn yellow?"

"Huh? What are you talking about? Blood is red, isn’t it?"

"I know that. But listen, the prosecution presented a cotton swab they used to take a sample of my blood. The tip was red, but a little further up, it was slightly yellow. Could that happen?"

"I see. Well, yeah, it’s not impossible. For example, if you leave blood alone after taking a sample, it eventually separates into two layers: a clot and serum. The clear part on top is the serum, and that can look slightly yellow. So that could explain it. But, to see noticeable separation like that, blood has to be left in the air for around two hours. I don’t know how much blood was on that swab, but normally, it would dry before separating."

"So, in other words, it wouldn’t normally turn yellow just from being swabbed?"

"Yeah. And besides, the serum layer isn’t that thick. If you use a swab, it’d soak up the blood and turn completely red before it could even get to the yellow part."

"That’s strange... But the cotton swab the prosecution submitted definitely had a yellowish stain on it."

"Hmm..."

Ujigami stroked his chin, deep in thought.

"Maybe it had EDTA in it?"

"...Don’t use technical terms like that. I hate having to ask for an explanation."

"EDTA, or Ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid… not that you’d understand. Basically, it’s an anticoagulant. If you’re going to specialize in murder cases, you should at least know that much. Listen, when we take a blood sample, we usually use a test tube with EDTA in it. Otherwise, the blood will coagulate and turn into a sticky mess. But with an anticoagulant, the blood doesn’t clot and instead separates into two layers: the bottom half is the red blood cell layer, which turns a dark red, while the top half, the plasma layer, becomes a yellowish clear liquid. In that case, if you swab the sample, you might get some of that yellow layer on there."

"...I see. So that’s how it works."

I didn’t really understand all that talk about plasma or clots, but at least I understood one thing.

Basically, if EDTA is mixed with blood, the top part will turn yellow.

I was beginning to connect the dots. This was getting interesting.

"So, if the bloodstain at the crime scene had EDTA in it, that could explain why the cotton swab turned yellow, right?"

"Yeah, I suppose it’s not impossible… but come on, that’s ridiculous. How would EDTA get into a bloodstain at a crime scene?"

But as he said that, Ujigami immediately gave me a look like he was staring at something disturbing.

"...Hey, don’t give me that creepy grin in my house. What if my daughter sees it? It’s not good for her education."

What a rude thing to say.

Still, I couldn’t stop the grin from spreading across my face.

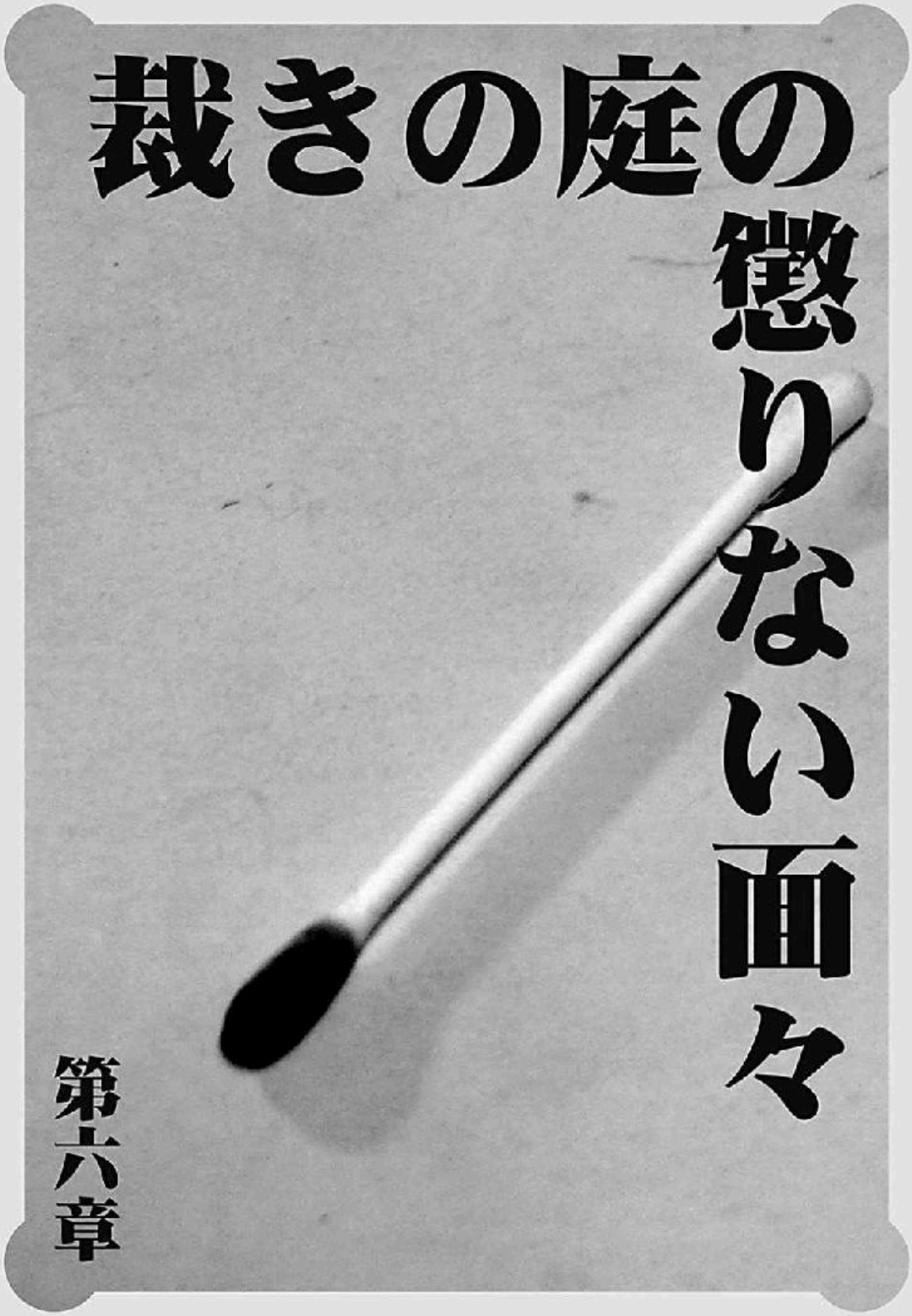
Why was there EDTA in the bloodstains at the crime scene?

No, that’s not it. It’s the opposite. Why were there bloodstains with EDTA at the crime scene? If you think about it that way, there’s only one possible answer.

Just watch, Togasaki. I’m going to wipe that smug look off your face.

...Wait, didn’t I make a similar resolution yesterday?

裁きの庭の懲りない面々



第六章

Chapter 6: The Unrepentant Faces in the Court

January 16th, 10:00 AM, District Courtroom 3

Once again, the gallery was packed to capacity.

These days, there aren't many trials where the gallery is full every time. Especially not for something as mundane as a murder case. It must be thanks to my charisma. Maybe next time I'm involved in a trial, they should start charging admission. It could turn into a nice little side income.

That said, now was not the time to be thinking about how much to charge for front-row premium tickets. I had more pressing matters to attend to. First, I needed to act as if I'd completely forgotten that yesterday I boldly declared, "I will prove the corruption of the city councilor Akamura." Today, everything I'd be testifying to had nothing to do with Akamura.

So, as usual, I turned to my so-called defense attorney, who had already started preparing for his job far too quickly.

"Hey, Takeda. Today, I need you to do something that actually resembles a lawyer's job."

Takeda, of course, didn't look too happy about it, but despite everything, he still had some sense of responsibility as my defense attorney, so he didn't outright refuse.

"...What do you want me to do?"

"Put me on the stand. Then ask me the questions I've written down here."

I handed him a sheet of paper.

Takeda glanced at the memo and reluctantly took it.

"Well, I guess I don't have much choice. I'll do it, since I'm already involved in this."

The overly stern judge entered the courtroom, and the trial resumed shortly after.

"Now, defense counsel, please call the witness."

"Understood, Your Honor."

It wasn't me who said that. It was Takeda, whom I had just asked for a favor earlier.

"As the defense's first witness today, I'd like to call the defendant, Mr. Yamashika, to the stand."

The gallery immediately started murmuring as Takeda called me, the defendant, to the witness stand.

With that background noise as my BGM, I took the stand.

To think I'd end up not only being a defendant in a murder trial but also taking the witness stand myself. Life sure takes some strange turns.

"Now, Mr. Yamashika. On January 8th, the day before the incident, you were visited by the victim, Mr. Ebata, correct?"

"Yes."

The courtroom stirred again at the introduction of this completely new fact.

"And for what reason did Mr. Ebata visit you?"

"He worked as an aide to a city councilor named Akamura. One day, Mr. Ebata realized that the city councilor Akamura was engaging in fraudulent activities, notably awarding public works contracts in a way that benefited him personally. Being a man of integrity, Mr. Ebata decided to blow the whistle on him. However, since Akamura wielded significant influence in the local community, Mr. Ebata felt uneasy about doing this on his own. So, he came to me, seeking my protection."

"And you agreed to help him?"

"Yes, I did."

"So, what did you do next?"

"The next day, I went to Mr. Ebata's workplace—the office of the city councilor Akamura—at his request. When I arrived, Mr. Ebata was the only one there. Under my supervision as a lawyer, we attempted to take out documents that would serve as evidence of the fraudulent public works contracts."

The murmuring in the courtroom grew louder, prompting the judge to call for order.

"I see. And did that attempt go smoothly?"

"No, it didn't. At the time, I decided it would be wise to leave evidence that I had been in the office, so I accepted a cup of coffee. That decision, however, led to a troublesome situation."

"In other words, the fingerprints and saliva found on the coffee cup, which the prosecution introduced as Evidence D, were there because of that?"

"Exactly."

"And what was this troublesome situation that occurred?"

"About ten minutes after drinking the coffee, I suddenly felt incredibly drowsy. Someone must have spiked it with drugs beforehand. The next thing I knew, I had lost consciousness."

"When you woke up, what did you find?"

"It was shocking. When I came to, I wasn't in the office anymore. I was lying in some bushes outside, near a river—I could tell by the sound of the water. And that's not all. For some reason, I was holding a bloodstained knife in my right hand, and next to me was Mr. Ebata's body, bleeding from his abdomen."

"I have no further questions."

At some point, the courtroom had fallen completely silent.

This was the first time the truth about the incident had been publicly revealed.

Of course, it would be too convenient to think that the jury would immediately believe me. But since my story was logically sound, they wouldn't be able to dismiss it outright either. It was that hesitation which had brought about this silence.

"Prosecutor Togasaki, your cross-examination."

"Yes, just one question."

Togasaki, the only one maintaining his calm in the room, stood up.

The thought of being cross-examined by that hyena made me feel uneasy, but this time I could easily predict what he'd ask. Togasaki isn't foolish enough to drag out a cross-examination with an expert like me. He'd likely just ask one leading question, designed to plant some kind of image in the jurors' minds, regardless of my response.

"Defendant Yamashika, your testimony was certainly interesting. But other than your own statement, is there any evidence to prove that you and Mr. Ebata met on January 8th? And please, don't bring out someone close to you as a witness."

There it was. If I answered "yes," he'd accuse me of lacking sufficient evidence. If I answered "no," he'd call me a liar. That's the annoying thing about leading questions. They're great stress relief when you're the one asking them.

In situations like this, the best thing to do is to deflect.

"Prosecutor Togasaki, it would be easy for me to say 'yes,' but let's not get caught up in this pointless back-and-forth. The jury should be the ones to make that judgment."

"Hmm…"

At that moment, Togasaki glanced not at me but at the judge.

It would've been easy for Togasaki to continue arguing. But it seemed he feared a tedious debate might annoy the jury further.

"That's all. I'll end my cross-examination."

"Very well. Defense counsel, your next witness?"

With that, Takeda's role was done, and I resumed my position as the defense attorney to call the next witness.

"I'd like to call Chief Inspector Endai, who investigated the case."

The middle-aged detective, still wearing his signature bright red tie, took the stand.

"Now, Chief Inspector Endai. You and your team believe that the scene of the murder was Mr. Ebata's workplace, the office of the city councilor Akamura, correct?"

"It's not just a belief. We have evidence to support it, as well as testimony from forensic experts."

"And in that office, there was a coffee cup with my fingerprints and saliva, as well as bloodstains allegedly belonging to me, all of which led you to conclude I'm the perpetrator, right?"

"It's not just that. You were also found next to the body, holding the murder weapon—a knife, no less—"

"That's enough. That's all I needed to hear. So, the basis for your claim is clear, right?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"But I've already testified as to why my coffee cup was found at the scene. So, if those bloodstains were planted there by someone in an attempt to frame me, your case would easily fall apart, wouldn't it?"

"Hahaha! I knew you'd say that! Yes, you're absolutely right. Even if we set aside the coffee cup for argument's sake, how do you plan to explain the bloodstains? The victim bears signs of a struggle before he was killed. You must have been injured during that altercation, leaving your blood behind, isn't that the truth? Or are you going to claim that someone stole your blood?"

I smirked.

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm claiming. Thank you for practically giving me the answer yourself."

"…What?"

"Chief Inspector Endai, I'd like you to recall something. I believe your team took a sample of my blood at one point. I'd be thrilled if you remember that."

"…Are you suggesting I have no memory?"

"Oh no, not at all. I'm questioning not just your memory, but also your reasoning skills. And your fashion sense, while I'm at it."

Endai's face twitched slightly, though he seemed to suppress it with sheer willpower.

"Objection!"

"Sustained."

"I withdraw the statement."

After the obligatory exchange,

"Now, let me ask again. Chief Inspector Endai, you did take a blood sample from me, didn't you?"

"Yes, we certainly did. But what of it?"

"Good. Now, how about this theory: You were determined to convict me of murder, no matter what, because I've repeatedly embarrassed the police. Although your position should have been overseeing the investigation from a distance, you took charge directly.

As the investigation progressed, the circumstantial evidence piled up—like how I was found near the body, holding what seemed to be the murder weapon, a knife. But you still lacked decisive proof. So, under the pretense of forensic analysis, you took a sample of my blood. Of course, some of it was used for actual analysis. But not all of it. You kept some of the blood to frame me. Yes, you planted that blood at the office of city councilor Akamura, which you claimed was the crime scene!”

“I-I object!”

The gallery erupted in murmurs, and almost simultaneously, Togasaki began shouting in fury.

“Your Honor, this is baseless speculation, fabricated out of thin air! The defense is clearly trying to disrupt the proceedings! The prosecution demands that this nonsense be stricken from the record immediately!”

“In other words, Prosecutor Togasaki—”

I placed my hand on my hip and puffed out my chest, retorting from my seat.

“If we, the defense, can present evidence to support this, you would have no objections, correct?”

Perhaps because of how confidently I spoke, even Togasaki seemed momentarily thrown off balance.

“Well, well, now this is interesting. If you truly have such evidence, by all means, I’d love to see it.”

“Very well. Then to prove it, I will now call a witness—”

Just at that moment, both Togasaki and I realized something at the same time.

The judge, who had been left out of the discussion, was twitching slightly around his temples, clearly agitated.

“Y-Your Honor. In deference to the prosecution’s objection, I will conclude my questioning of Chief Inspector Endai for now.”

I hurriedly tried to smooth things over. Whether it was because this appeased the judge or because he had already resigned himself to the situation, I wasn’t sure. But at least, for now, I managed to avoid further irritation.

“…Very well. Prosecution, do you wish to cross-examine?”

“No, Your Honor. Until the defense presents the so-called evidence they claim to have, the prosecution reserves the right to hold off on cross-examination.”

“Understood. Defense, who is your next witness?”

“I have some questions for Dr. Eboshi.”

Soon after, Dr. Eboshi took the stand.

First, I requested a piece of evidence from the judge, then immediately began questioning.

“Dr. Eboshi, first, do you recognize this?”

What I held up was a plastic bag containing a cotton swab used to collect my blood sample.

“Yeh, it appears to be Prosecution’s Exhibit F.”

“That’s correct.”

I approached the witness stand and held Exhibit F close to Dr. Eboshi’s face.

“Now, take a good look at this.”

“Hmm. I see it clearly. And?”

“As you can see, the tip of the swab is red, isn’t it?”

“Yeh, well, of course. It was used to collect a blood sample.”

“But doesn’t it also appear that just above the red tip, it’s stained a little yellow?”

“Huh? …Hmm. Now that you mention it, yeh, it does look a bit yellowish.”

“Exactly. Now, Dr. Eboshi, do you know what EDTA is?”

“Well of course I do. It’s a substance with many uses.”

“It’s also used as an anticoagulant, correct?”

“That’s right.”

“When blood samples are collected for testing, they’re always placed into tubes containing EDTA to prevent coagulation, right?”

“Yeh, that’s correct.”

“Now, Dr. Eboshi, do you know what happens when blood is mixed with EDTA and left for an extended period?”

“Well, as the name suggests, the anticoagulant properties prevent the blood from clotting. Normally, when blood is exposed to air, it coagulates and becomes sticky. But with EDTA, that doesn’t happen.”

“So, any blood collected for testing would always contain EDTA, right?”

“Exactly.”

“And when this happens, the blood separates into two layers: the plasma and the blood cells, correct?”

“Yeh, that’s right.”

“And the upper layer, the plasma, is a pale yellow color, isn’t it?”

“Yeh, it is.”

“So, what does this mean?”

I smiled broadly.

“The cotton swab used to collect my bloodstain from the crime scene has a portion that’s turned yellow. This suggests that the bloodstain had separated into plasma and blood cells, meaning EDTA was present. Or, to put it more clearly, there’s no way that bloodstains naturally found at the crime scene would contain EDTA. In other words, this is proof that the police, in their eagerness to frame me, used the blood they collected from me and planted it at the crime scene!”

“Objection! Objection! OBJECTION!!!”

Togasaki had finally lost it.

“Your Honor, this is a malicious use of sophistry! There’s no need to entertain this nonsense!”

“Calm down, Prosecutor Togasaki. This isn’t all that complicated. Dr. Eboshi?”

“Y-Yeh, what is it?”

“I order you to immediately analyze the bloodstains found at the crime scene, specifically to determine whether EDTA is present.”

“Y-You mean right now?”

“I said immediately. How long will it take?”

“Well, I suppose… about an hour should do it…”

“Very well. You have fifty minutes. This court will now take a fifty-minute recess.”

With a bang of the gavel, the judge briskly left the courtroom.

This is unbelievable. But for me, it couldn’t be better.

Dr. Eboshi glanced at Togasaki for help, but the hyena-like prosecutor only gave a resigned nod, signaling him to hurry up. With no other choice, Dr. Eboshi stomped out of the courtroom.

It’s all falling into place. There’s no doubt that the bloodstain will contain EDTA. Otherwise, there’d be no explanation for the yellowed cotton swab or why my blood was found at the office.

This will strongly suggest that the police conspired to frame me. Once that impression is planted, the rest of the trial is in my hands.

Togasaki likely understands this too. He’s already scrambling around, preparing a rebuttal.

But it’s useless. Whatever counterevidence they present later, by then, the jury will already see the whole thing as a conspiracy to wrongfully convict me.

◆

And fifty minutes later.

Dr. Eboshi stood at the witness stand, drenched in sweat and gasping for breath, even though it was the middle of winter.

His face was pale, not from a lack of oxygen, but from the fact that my claim had been proven.

This should have been a moment of triumph.

However... for some reason, my heart was not at ease. Something felt off. There wasn't the slightest hint of agitation or frustration on Togasaki’s face. On the contrary, he seemed even more composed than before.

Why? Why is he so calm? He must understand the dire situation he will be in once the presence of EDTA is proven.

Unless... Could it be... that EDTA wasn’t detected?

That couldn’t be. But then again, everything so far has been based on my assumptions…

This is bad. I’m starting to feel a bit uneasy.

"Dr. Eboshi, do you have the results?"

"Y-Yeh, well..."

In response to the judge’s question, Eboshi answered, unable to hide his unease.

"Then testify. Was EDTA found in the defendant’s bloodstains left at the crime scene?"

This was the moment of truth.

"Y-Yeh."

Phew. I let out a breath of relief without even realizing it.

The gallery erupted in a commotion, and as usual, the judge banged his gavel, sending a few people out of the courtroom before the noise settled down.

Just as I suspected. It was all part of the police’s, or more likely Chief Inspector Endai’s, conspiracy.

That had to be the case, but... something still felt wrong. Even now, Togasaki’s expression hadn’t changed, and he still had that faint smile. Why? Had he just given up? Or was it some kind of resignation? No, that couldn’t be it. There’s no way the prosecutor known as the Hyena—well, I’m the one who gave him that nickname—would give up this easily.

And then, it happened.

"Your Honor! May I speak?"

Suddenly, he made his move.

"What is it, Prosecutor Togasaki?"

"With the testimony we've just heard, it's been confirmed that EDTA was present in the defendant's bloodstains at the crime scene. This has unfortunately raised significant doubts about the authenticity of the evidence. However, we, the prosecution, are prepared to provide a reasonable explanation for why the defendant's blood contained EDTA. Therefore, we request permission to call a witness."

What the—?

Hey, hey, hey! Don't tell me he had this up his sleeve the whole time!

Now I understood the source of Togasaki's unshakable confidence. If he was this sure of himself, he must have some terrifying ace up his sleeve. The confidence I had felt earlier was now replaced by a cold dread.

"Hmm. I suppose we have no choice but to hear you out. Very well, I'll allow it. Who will you be calling?"

"I'd like to summon Mr. Yoshio Hosoda, who manages the 'Ask Dr. Yoshio' section on the official website of Ko-Ka Hebusi Bottlers Co., Ltd."

...Who?

The witness who took the stand didn't seem to resemble a doctor at all. He was just a young salaried worker. He wasn't wearing a lab coat, just a suit. Well, given that his last name was Hosoda—which literally means "thin rice field"—it was a bit ironic that he was slightly overweight, but he didn't give off much of a "doctor" vibe.

"Mr. Hosoda, could you first explain your job in detail?"

"Of course. As I was introduced earlier, I work in the PR department of Ko-Ka Hebusi Bottlers Co., Ltd. As part of my job, I manage the Q&A section on our official website, where I answer a variety of questions from consumers about our products."

"So, in other words, you're quite knowledgeable about Ko-Ka Hebusi Bottlers' products, correct?"

"Yes, I'd say I'm fairly knowledgeable."

"Good. Now, are you familiar with EDTA?"

"Yes, I am. Ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid."

"Could you explain the properties of EDTA?"

"Certainly. First of all, there's its anticoagulant effect, which has already been mentioned. But it's also used as a stabilizer and preservative to maintain the taste and quality of foods."

"Let me ask you this: EDTA isn't harmful to the body, is it?"

"Of course not. For example, when harmful metals like mercury, lead, or arsenic build up in the body, EDTA combined with multivitamins is administered via IV to help remove these metals. It's perfectly safe, as it's used in such medical treatments."

"I see. Thank you for the clarification."

Given that he worked for a world-renowned company, Togasaki's tone was unusually polite, probably to avoid any potential backlash. Well, if I were in his position, I'd handle it the same way.

"Now, EDTA is also used in your company's new product, Ko-Ka Hebusi Blue, correct?"

"Yes, we use it to preserve the flavor."

"No further questions."

...What?

W-What did he just say? What was the point of that question? Ko-Ka Hebusi Blue? I feel like I've heard that name somewhere recently… Where was it?

"Defense counsel, do you wish to cross-examine?"

"…No. At the very least, we reserve the right to hold off on cross-examination until the prosecution's argument becomes clear."

"Very well. Prosecutor Togasaki, will you call your next witness?"

"Yes, of course. The next witness will be Mr. Susumu Hiraoka, who works part-time for Ko-Ka Hebusi Bottlers Co., Ltd."

The trial was becoming more and more chaotic. The confidence I had earlier had completely evaporated, and now I was on the defensive.

The next witness was a young man, probably in his twenties. He wasn't even wearing a suit. He looked like a student or a part-time worker. I had the vague feeling I'd seen him somewhere before, but I couldn't remember where.

"Mr. Hiraoka, please testify about where you were and what you were doing on the evening of the 9th, when the incident occurred."

"Uh, well, I was handing out samples in front of the station, saying 'Enjoy! Enjoy!'"

"What samples were you handing out?"

"Ko-Ka Hebusi Blue. It had just been released."

...Now I remember. When I went to Akamura's office, that guy was handing out drinks with that brat Satsuki. No wonder I didn't remember—it was just a brief encounter.

"Now, was there anyone you recognize from this courtroom among the people you gave samples to?"

"Yes, there was. I didn't hand it to him directly, though. One of my part-time colleagues gave it to him."

"And who was that?"

"Attorney Yamashika. He's well-known locally, so I remembered him."

"Did he drink the Ko-Ka Hebusi Blue he received?"

"Yes. I saw him sitting on a bench at the station and drinking it."

"Thank you. No further questions."

At that point, Togasaki turned to the judge.

"Your Honor, I believe the connection is now clear. Why was EDTA found in the defendant's bloodstains at the crime scene? Chief Inspector Endai is a man of integrity, not someone who would fabricate evidence as the defense claims. But the fact remains that EDTA was found in the bloodstains! Why? The answer is simple: before the incident, the defendant consumed a drink that contained EDTA!"

"W-What was thaaaaat—?!"

He did it! That bastard Togasaki actually went through with it, making such an absurd claim!

"Y-Your Honor! This is a ridiculous farce by the prosecution! It's nonsense! Baseless conjecture!"

"Interesting. So, Attorney Yamashika, could you explain what exactly about this is baseless nonsense? It has been proven that Ko-Ka Hebusi Blue contains EDTA, and that you consumed it. I don't see how this could be more well-grounded in fact."

Ughhh. He was absolutely right. In fact, this was the exact kind of argument I liked to use myself.

But this was bad. If I let this go, all the counterarguments I had carefully built would fall apart.

"Y-Your Honor, please, just a moment. When I think about it, I've still reserved my right to cross-examine. But things are getting a bit too technical. To properly conduct a cross-examination on this matter, I'll need some preparation. I'd like to consult with an expert, so could I request a ten-minute recess?"

"That seems like a fair request. Very well, we will take a ten-minute recess."

◆

I immediately rushed back to the waiting room and called Ujigami, the self-proclaimed forensic pathologist.

"…So that's the situation! The prosecution just hit me with an insane argument. Do something!"

"…Man, the prosecution's really pulling out all the stops these days. Where the hell are they getting this info?"

"I don't care about that! Just give me something I can use to counter this! If things keep going like this, I'm headed straight to jail!"

"That might actually make society a bit more peaceful. I've got a young kid at home, so it's probably best to reduce the number of dangerous elements out there… Okay, okay, I get it. Don't get mad, I was just joking. You don't want to make dangerous people mad. I don't know if this will help, but I'll tell you something any doctor would notice."

…After listening to Ujigami for just ten seconds, I had a revelation.

"Damn, was it really something that simple?! Alright, thanks!"

I snapped my phone shut and made a beeline for the courtroom.

◆

When I returned to the courtroom, I immediately spoke up.

"Your Honor! At this time, I would like to exercise my right to cross-examine Mr. Yoshio Hosoda from Ko-Ka Hebusi Bottlers' PR department!"

"…Do as you please."

When the witness finally appeared, I fired off a rapid series of questions.

"Mr. Hosoda. Even if a person drinks Ko-Ka Hebusi Blue, the EDTA concentration isn't high enough to suppress coagulation throughout their entire bloodstream, is it?"

"Yes, that's correct. The human body contains about three liters of blood, right? And a single can of Ko-Ka Hebusi Blue is just 350 milliliters. The amount of EDTA in that is negligible."

"That's what I wanted to hear. One more thing: even if someone consumes EDTA, it doesn't remain in the body for long periods, does it?"

"That's right. EDTA doesn't stay in the body for extended periods. It's eventually processed and excreted."

"Thank you, no further questions."

Satisfied, I turned to face the judge.

"That concludes the defense's argument. It's true that I drank a beverage containing EDTA. However, the amount of EDTA I actually consumed was negligible. In other words, Prosecutor Togasaki's argument is nothing more than a convenient distortion of the facts, a desperate attempt to obscure the inconvenient truth!"

But then, that bastard stood up again.

"Your Honor!"

"…What now, Prosecutor Togasaki?"

"We have prepared a witness to refute the defense's claim."

"…Just get on with it and call your witness already."

The next witness Togasaki called was none other than Susumu Hiraoka, the man who had been handing out Ko-Ka Hebusi Blue samples.

"Mr. Hiraoka. You testified that one of your part-time colleagues gave the defendant a sample of Ko-Ka Hebusi Blue, and that you saw the defendant drink it, correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Could you describe in detail what happened when the defendant drank the Ko-Ka Hebusi Blue?"

"Uh… sure. Let's see. After receiving the sample from us, he sat down on a bench inside the station and tried to drink it. But, well, something unfortunate happened. Ko-Ka Hebusi Blue is a carbonated drink, and the samples weren't exactly served chilled. Plus, we had shaken them up quite a bit while handing them out, so… well, I'm sure you can imagine. As soon as he opened the can, *pssh*…"

"So, the contents sprayed out?"

"Yes. His hand was completely soaked in blue liquid."

"Thank you. Your Honor, if I may, I'd like to call Dr. Eboshi to the stand for further testimony."

"…Go ahead, do what you want."

At this point, the trial's order and decorum were completely out the window.

"Dr. Eboshi. It's true that drinking Ko-Ka Hebusi Blue wouldn't introduce enough EDTA into the bloodstream to have any significant effect, correct?"

"Yeh, that's correct."

"But what if—hypothetically—someone spilled Ko-Ka Hebusi Blue on their hand, and then that hand was bleeding? Wouldn't it be possible for a reasonable amount of EDTA to enter the bloodstain?"

What the hellllllllllllllll!?

"I-I see! That's certainly possible. The amount of EDTA in a blood collection tube is quite small, but even that is enough to be effective. If we're talking about just a small amount of blood, even a tiny amount of EDTA would suffice. It's entirely plausible that the bloodstain could contain EDTA in this case."

This is insane! He’s really going that far!?

It’s true—I did spill Ko-Ka Hebusi Blue on my hand that day!

But to bring up such a minor detail to cover up the police’s fabrication of evidence!? That bastard’s a real hyena with horns! A demon hyena!

…No, wait. Could this actually be possible? What if Chief Inspector Endai didn’t intentionally spill the blood, but the perpetrator simply injured my hand while I was unconscious? And when the blood dripped from my hand, which had been soaked in Ko-Ka Hebusi Blue, it just so happened to contain EDTA…?

No. No, no, no! Even if that’s possible, I can’t admit it. If I don’t absolutely reject this, my life is in real danger.

"Your Honor! I object! Allowing this kind of speculative testimony undermines the integrity of the entire trial!"

"Then let me ask you this, Defendant Yamashika," Togasaki said, turning to me. "Can you say your own claims aren’t based on speculation?"

"At the very least, it’s a fact that EDTA was found in the bloodstain!"

"However, I’ve just provided a reasonable explanation based on solid testimony."

"What part of that was reasonable testimonyyyyyy!?"

"Order! Order in the court!"

The gavel was banged with great force.

"I must remind both of you. I should have warned you earlier, but neither of you has the right to present your own personal speculations. Deciding how to interpret witness testimony and the presented evidence is the role of the jury. Attacking each other personally only serves to disrupt the proceedings. In short, both of you—shut up, and stop making unnecessary remarks."

With that said, neither Togasaki nor I had any choice but to fall silent.

"Good. I see you understand. Let me remind the jury once again: it is your right to decide how to assess the evidence. However, you are not allowed to express your opinions or listen to others’ opinions until all the evidence has been presented. Please keep this in mind when considering the evidence submitted today."

The judge addressed the jury with a stern face, which seemed more like intimidation than a simple reminder. Naturally, the jury, looking rather tense, could only nod in agreement.

"Now. It seems to me that both the defense and the prosecution are losing their composure. I don't believe we can continue with the proceedings in a smooth manner. Therefore, by my authority as judge, I will end today's session. Any objections?"

...At that moment, Togasaki raised an objection, but since I had lost my trump card, I naturally agreed.

The objection was overruled, considering the need to show some leniency toward the defendant, and the day's proceedings were adjourned.

January 16th, 12:10 PM, Yamashika Law Office

"Hey, Zenko. I feel like I said this exact thing the other day, but isn't this looking seriously bad?"

As soon as I arrived at the office, I was greeted by that brat with her usual annoying remarks.

"Shut up. I don't need you pointing it out for me to know."

"Oh, I see. So the fact that you're not denying it means it really is seriously bad, huh?"

What a damn irritating brat.

As if I needed to be told. It's true, though. This is bad. Really bad. I never imagined my biggest trump card—the presence of EDTA—would be shut down like that.

"B-But, Mr. Zenko, we still have one more thing, right? We can argue that the knife wasn't the real murder weapon."

Sensing the atmosphere, Yukina spoke up as if to encourage me.

"Yeah, but we don't have enough evidence to back that up yet. If we could just find the real murder weapon, we'd be in a good place, but we don't even have a clue where it is. That's why it was so important to convince the jury that the police were trying to frame me with the EDTA issue first. After that, we could tackle the murder weapon. That way, the judge and jury would see it our way when we—"

"Pull a fast one on them, huh?"

Kageno chimed in with an unnecessary comment.

"Don't make it sound so sketchy. I was saying we'd convince them."

"Isn’t it the same thing for you, Zenko?"

…Damn it, they don't let up, ever.

"And in the end, what happened today? That approach’s not gonna work anymore, right? Looks to me like you’re headed straight for jail."

"No, I’m not. I’ve still got one option left. Sure, calling any more witnesses or presenting new evidence won’t give me much of a chance. But that’s only true *inside* the courtroom. If the courtroom's no good, I’ll take the fight elsewhere."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Hmph, you can’t figure it out? I just need to threaten one of those three—the primary color trio—and get them to confess."

"Oh, I see."

The brat clapped his hands as if she finally understood.

"I didn’t want to resort to this if I could help it. In the courtroom, as long as the judge gives his approval, anything goes. But outside, things don’t work that way."

"But wasn’t this whole mess a murder committed to cover up a shady construction deal? Do you really think anyone’s going to confess at this point?"

Satsuki butted in, Kageno made snide remarks, and Yukina worried in my place. Typical Yukina, but still, a man can’t just sit back and let a woman worry all the time. I should show her a bit of hope and ease her mind.

"Yeah, you’re right. But there’s still one thing in my favor. Kosuke Akamura, Sota Aotani, and Moegi Rokuda. Those three suspects aren’t exactly bound together by deep trust. They’re tied together by mutual interest—their shared greed."

"I see. A bond driven by greed isn’t going to hold up for long."

Kageno gave his blunt assessment.

"So, who are you going to target out of the three?"

"Ah, that’s obvious. That fella, Rokuda. Out of the three, he’s definitely in the weakest position right now, having been reduced to the president of a dummy company. Akamura can still secure public construction projects from the government, and Aotani, as a bureaucrat, has access to

the bid prices. But unlike those two, Rokuda isn't indispensable. Anyone could replace him. So, my target has to be Rokuda. I'll push him into a corner until he has no choice but to confess everything."

"I see, so in the end, it's turning into a pretty dirty plan after all. So, how exactly do you plan to go about it? Knowing you, you've already thought it through, right?"

"Of course I have."

As I spoke, I pulled out my phone.

Before I put my plan into action, there was one thing I needed to confirm. I dialed a certain number.

"Hello?"

After a few rings, a familiar young woman's voice answered.

It was Kokushima, the girlfriend of Ebata, who had claimed to be on my side but ended up doing nothing of the sort.

"Hey, it's me, Yamashika."

"M-Mr. Yamashika…? W-Why are you calling me now, all of a sudden…?"

"I just have something I want to ask. Do you know anything about a guy named Rokuda? He was apparently involved in some shady business with Akamura."

"Huh? Um… let me see. I think I do remember hearing that name from Mr. Ebata."

"I see. Did Ebata ever mention that Rokuda was a coward or easily frightened?"

"U-Um, I'm not sure about that…"

"Alright, no problem. Sorry for bothering you."

"No, that's fine, but… does this have something to do with anything?"

"Yeah. The guy's offered to cooperate with me. He said if he's not charged, he'll expose everything—the shady construction deal, the murder, all of it. But after what happened with Minekami in court yesterday, I can't trust him. I figured I'd look into his background first. If he's a coward, it's possible that guilt's eating at him, and he might come running to me."

"I-I see…"

"Why don’t you come to court tomorrow? You might finally get rid of any doubts you still have about me. See you."

That should be enough to set things in motion.

"…Wait a minute. Something’s off. Why are you acting like Rokuda’s already agreed to cooperate?"

Satsuki had picked up on something sharp again, but I chose to ignore it this time.

Now, it was time to set my plan into motion and entangle that trio.

"Hey, Kageno, I’ve got a job for you. Pretend to be a reporter or something and approach Akamura. Do it right now."

"Huh?"

閑章
悪魔の策動

Interlude: The Devil’s Scheme in Motion

"Mr. Akamura, you have a visitor..."

That afternoon, Kosuke Akamura, a city councilor, was informed by his pale-faced female secretary.

"A visitor? Oh, right, the newspaper reporter said they were coming for an interview."

"No, it’s not that person. Um... it’s a lawyer named Yamashika. The one arrested for allegedly murdering Mr. Ebata..."

"...What?"

Zenko Yamashika. That man. The lawyer who had the audacity to conspire with that ungrateful traitor Ebata—the very same Ebata who forgot the favor of being made his secretary and turned against him—to try and bring about his downfall.

Even in the recent trial, he kept bringing up Amakura's name, claiming he was involved in shady construction deals.

For now, since no solid evidence has been presented, people were dismissing it as just more scheming from Yamashika, but as a politician, even having such suspicions arise can be fatal. He had to hastily throw money around, promising major construction companies more public contracts just to keep them quiet, but the damage is no joke. Not only is the method of outsourcing public works likely unusable anymore, but people’s perception of him had also changed, even if just slightly. And with the next election approaching, it was a real headache.

"What should we do? Should I send him away?"

"…No, it’s fine. Let him in."

The very person responsible for all this trouble had come here.

Amakura was curious as to what the lawyer wanted, and if he made even the slightest threat, he could immediately report it to one of his police contacts. There was no logical reason to turn him away.

Yamashika was led in by the secretary, showing no signs of intimidation despite being in enemy territory.

Once the secretary left, leaving just the two of them, Akamura spoke in a voice full of menace.

"I didn’t expect you to have the nerve to show your face here."

"Well, I hadn’t had the chance to meet face-to-face with you yet, after all you did to frame me. Consider this a courtesy call."

"Ha, you’re rather calm for someone destined to be thrown in jail in a few days. But it’s not just jail. You’ve defamed my good name in court. Outsourcing public works? Who do you think you are, spouting such nonsense? I’ll make sure you pay for this. I’ll sue you in civil court and strip you of everything you own. You can count on that."

"Oh, thanks for the heads-up. In return, let me give you a little warning: it won’t be me going to jail, it’ll be you. And it’ll be you who loses all your assets."

"So, the rumors are true—you’re quite the bluffer."

At this, Yamashika suddenly smirked.

It was a clear sneer, one that would irritate anyone, not just Akamura.

"Unfortunately for you, this time it’s not a bluff. I know all about the crooked deals you’ve been brokering with your associates, thanks to Ebata. Here’s a tip: while you’re busy shoring up your support for the election, you might want to rein in your underlings a little better."

"...What?"

He clearly knew everything Amakura was involved in. Even the city councilor couldn’t help but feel a pang of anxiety.

On top of that, this young man was suggesting that one of his associates might betray him.

"Hmph! Spouting more nonsense. You think I’d fall for such ridiculous lies?"

"Oh, you really think it’s nonsense? Do you honestly believe all your associates were fully on board with the plan to kill Ebata? If so, you’re much more naïve than I thought."

A cold sweat ran down Akamura’s back.

He remembered that when the plan to kill Ebata was first brought up, one man had hesitated.

(Could it be... Rokuda...?)

"Oh, that’s a good look—that worried expression suits you."

Yamashika’s mocking tone snapped Akamura back to reality.

"S-Shut up! I don’t have time to waste listening to your nonsense anymore. Get out!"

"Oh, already? That’s a shame. Once you’re behind bars, we won’t have another chance to chat. I was hoping we could talk a bit more."

"Enough! Get out, now!"

Half in a hurry, Akamura pushed the troublesome lawyer out of his office.

Still, he thought, that damned lawyer really was something. He was just as much of a headache as Ebata, the traitor who had tried to betray him. They say birds of a feather flock together, but what an uncontrollable lawyer.

Yet, the words that lawyer had left behind still bothered him.

It couldn’t be Aotani from the city hall. That man had been fully on board with the plan to kill Ebata from the start.

But Rokuda was different. Ever since the beginning, he’d been hesitant about the plan.

Who could say for sure that Rokuda wouldn’t betray him?

"...I may have to keep an eye on him."

Fortunately, Yamashika’s trial was reaching its climax. Once that annoying lawyer was branded a murderer, no one would believe a word he said anymore. Then, after the dust had settled, Amakura would be free to go back to outsourcing public works again.

But until Yamashika’s trial was wrapped up, he needed to make sure Rokuda kept his mouth shut.

Just then, there was another knock on the door.

"What is it?"

"Mr. Akamura, you have another visitor. It’s Mr. Gakeno from the New York Times."

"Ah, finally. Let him in."

"Yes, sir."

The man who entered was a young reporter, about the same age as Yamashika.

"You must be the reporter from the New York Times—"

"Yes, that's right. I'm Gakeno from the New York Times."

As he said this, the man handed over a business card. Sure enough, it had the New York Times logo on it.

Personally, Akamura preferred the Wall Street Journal, but the NY Times was still one of the leading newspapers, with significant influence over those in power. Being interviewed by such a major newspaper was a matter of pride for Akamura.

Forgetting the unpleasant encounter he'd just had, Akamura put on his best political face.

"Ah, I've been expecting you. Please, have a seat."

Summoning his secretary to prepare tea, he guided the reporter to the sofa.

However, the reporter had a rather ominous look about him. He was tall, exuding an air of intimidation, and on top of that, he had long hair.

Well, intimidating could also be interpreted as sharp, but still, long hair seemed inappropriate for a newspaper reporter.

"Now, let's get straight to the interview, shall we?"

Gakeno pulled something long and thin from his chest pocket. It was a digital recorder.

"Mind if I record this conversation? Of course, I'll confirm the content with you afterward."

Since he was a reporter, using a recorder was only natural.

Akamura couldn't help but think that.

"Yes, I don't mind."

"Thank you, then…"

The recorder switched on.

"So, Mr. Akamura, let's start with your thoughts on financial policy. As a city councilor, I understand you've been working hard to stabilize the city's finances."

"That's right. People say the economy is picking up, but in reality, local governments everywhere are still struggling financially."

"I see. Oh, excuse me, Mr. Akamura, this is your fifth term, correct?"

"Yes, that’s correct."

"You’ve certainly had a long career."

"Yes, I’ve learned a lot over the years. About the nature of politics, that is."

"I see. So, currently, all local governments are struggling with deficits. What do you think is the first thing that needs to be done to restore fiscal health?"

"Well, it has to be public works. It seems like there’s a national trend to cut down on public works expenses, but that’s a mistake. In order to revitalize not just the local government’s finances but the local economy as well, it’s crucial to circulate a large amount of money."

"However, some say that public works only benefit a few individuals and only provide short-term recovery."

"With all due respect, it’s also a fact that public works have allowed local businesses to turn a profit, which in turn has revitalized the city’s tax revenue. I don’t care what some people might think. I firmly believe that this is the best course of action."

"I see—"

The long-haired reporter with the sharp eyes did come across as somewhat rude in his demeanor, but the interview itself flowed smoothly, and Akamura found himself thinking that he wasn’t such a bad reporter after all.

Above all, the fact that he hadn’t mentioned the suspicion of public works outsourcing that Yamashika had brought up in today's trial counted in his favor.

Akamura was actually looking forward to seeing this interview published, but the conversation from this moment would be used in a way that was entirely different from what Akamura had intended.

◆

It was later that evening when the phone rang at the shabby apartment where Moegi Rokuda, the president of Atamahane Inc., lived.

"Yeah, yeah, I’m coming."

Rokuda, speaking to himself in the way people who live alone often do, reached out with his right hand to answer the phone.

However, noticing that the bandage on his hand was in the way, he clicked his tongue and picked up the receiver with his left hand.

"Hello, this is Rokuda."

‘You’re Rokuda, right? The president of Atamahane Inc.?’

"...Yes, and you are?"

It was a voice he didn’t recognize—young, confident, and self-assured.

Rokuda had no way of knowing, but it was the kind of voice one might expect from a quack doctor hired by a certain lawyer for 10 dollars.

‘You don’t care who I am. I just want to sell you some information you might find interesting.’

"...Huh? What nonsense are you talking about? I’m going to hang up."

‘Wait, don’t hang up just yet. This has to do with the murder of Ebata, which you were involved in.’

"Wha—"

Rokuda gasped.

(How does he know about that...!?)

Rokuda had no personal connection to the murdered Ebata. No matter how much the police investigated, there was no way he should be implicated.

‘I see I hit the mark. Don’t be so scared. I’m on your side.’

"Y-You... Who the hell are you?"

‘I work for the prosecutor’s office. You know that guy, Zenko Yamashika, the one on trial right now, don’t you?’

"Yeah. I’ve been sitting in on the trial since I had some free time."

‘Good. That makes this quick. So, you’ve heard about the talk in the recent trial regarding Akamura, the city councilor, and his shady public works outsourcing?’

"…Y-Yeah."

‘That’s the one. There’s been some public outcry that we should be investigating it. Even the prosecutors have started to move.’

"W-What did you say...?"

‘And once the investigation began, something unexpected happened. Akamura, that crook caught up in all the suspicions, came to us offering a deal. He said he’d confess everything if we promised not to hold him criminally responsible. In exchange, he’d give us the name of the mastermind.’

"The... mastermind?"

‘You know who I’m talking about, right? It’s you.’

"T-That’s ridiculous!"

Akamura was supposed to be the mastermind behind the whole thing. Rokuda was nothing but a subordinate.

And now Amakura was trying to pin everything on Rokuda while getting off scot-free? That’s absurd.

"That’s nonsense! There’s no way that’s true!"

‘You think it’s nonsense? The fact that I’m even telling you this should be proof enough that it’s the truth, shouldn’t it?’

That much was true. Unless Akamura had betrayed him, there was no way anyone would know his name.

‘Am I right? This is valuable information, isn’t it? Now you’ve got some time to either skip town or find yourself some allies before you get arrested. But if you’re planning to run, be careful. Akamura can’t afford to let you slip away now. You might already be under surveillance, you know?’

"N-No way..."

The only reason Rokuda looked out the window at that moment was because there happened to be a window there.

Of course, he didn’t want to believe such suspicious information. But if asked whether he could completely deny the possibility, the answer was obviously no.

That’s why—

"A... Aaaaahhh!"

When he spotted Sota Aotani, the head of the Finance Division, standing outside the window, all his suspicions began to solidify into certainty.

Was he trying to remain hidden? He was peeking out from behind a telephone pole, watching him. He wasn’t trying to come inside. It was clear he was keeping an eye on him.

‘Well, what do you think? That was some useful information, wasn’t it?’

"Ah... Yeah."

‘To earn your trust, I’ll let you pay me later for this one. But if you want more information like this in the future, you’ll need to transfer about 100 dollars to the account I’m going to tell you now. You won’t get another chance like this. The account number is—’

Rokuda mechanically jotted down the number.

"Okay. I’ll transfer it right away."

‘Thanks for your business. I hope you don’t get arrested. Consider that my freebie.’

With that, the call ended.

Rokuda ran his hands through his hair and began pacing around the room.

"I can’t believe it! After using me like that, he’s going to betray me!"

But knowing Akamura’s character, it wasn’t entirely out of the question. He was the kind of man who would shamelessly use public money for himself and wouldn’t hesitate to kill someone. A small-time dummy company front like Rokuda would be disposed of without a second thought.

"What do I do? What do I do, what do I do...!?"

He wasn't going to let Amakura pin all the blame on him.

There was only one thing—one thing Akamura didn’t know. There was just one piece of evidence, a tape, that could prove Rokuda wasn’t the mastermind. But Akamura was a five-term

city councilor. He likely had significant influence over the police. If a small-time tax embezzler like Rokuda brought that tape to them, it'd probably get buried. Akamura wouldn't hesitate to do that—he had no qualms about murder, after all. And even if Rokuda used the tape, it wouldn't change the fact that he'd still be arrested as an accomplice.

Then should he run? But that wasn't an option either. He had no place to go, no money to run with. And on top of that, he was being watched by Aotani outside for reasons he couldn't even begin to understand.

Totally alone—those words flashed through his mind, and for a moment, he felt despair creeping in. That's when it happened.

The doorbell rang.

Someone was here. Was it Aotani...? With that thought, he peered through the peephole.

"What the—!"

He couldn't hide his shock.

Standing outside was none other than Zenko Yamashika.

There was no way he could forget that face. He'd once gone through the trouble of carrying the lawyer's unconscious body out of Akamura's office.

Normally, this would be someone he was clearly supposed to consider an enemy. The thought of pretending he wasn't home crossed his mind.

But then, he reconsidered. If Akamura had really betrayed him—

(...That's right. This man might actually become my ally!)

Rokuda made up his mind and opened the door.

"Hey. First time meeting face to face, huh? You're Rokuda, right?"

"Y-Yeah."

"Talking at the door is kind of awkward. Mind letting me in?"

"...Fine."

Yamashika stepping into his apartment was surely being seen by Aotani, who was outside.

What would he make of this? No doubt, he'd believe without question that Rokuda had betrayed Akamura.

Should he just resign himself to this fate? As that thought crossed Rokuda's mind, he sat on a floor cushion in the compact living space, facing Yamashika.

"Rokuda. I've got some interesting news for you."

"W-What? What's this about?"

"Well, before that, let me tell you something amusing. Do you know why I've been able to keep winning case after case against the renowned Japanese prosecutors?"

"N-No, I don't."

"Actually, there's a spy inside the prosecutor's office. This guy leaks all sorts of information to me."

Could it be that mysterious person who called earlier? If so, then the so-called renowned prosecutor's abilities don't seem that impressive.

"...And?"

"You know Akamura, the city councilor, right? ...No need to answer, just listen. Well, just a while ago, that very same Akamura went to the prosecutor's office. Do you know why?"

"..."

What Yamashika went on to say was almost identical to what the earlier phone call had revealed. Apparently, the prosecutors had started investigating the suspicion of public works outsourcing, and upon learning about it, Akamura had offered a plea bargain. In exchange for immunity, he would hand over the name of the mastermind and certain incriminating documents as evidence.

"Is... Is that true?"

"Yeah, it's true. There's proof, too."

"W-What do you mean!?"

"I'll let you listen to it. A recording of Akamura's conversation when he went to the prosecutor's office. Oh, and don't ask me how I got my hands on it."

With a sly smile, Yamashika pulled out a digital recorder from his inner pocket and pressed play.

‘Let me confirm. You’ve come here for a plea bargain, correct?’

A voice could be heard.

It wasn’t the voice of that prosecutor named Togasaki. However, the deep, resonant voice carried such an air of authority that there was no doubt it belonged to a prosecutor.

Rokuda didn’t know it, but it was the kind of voice you might hear from a lousy private investigator a certain lawyer had hired for 20 dollars.

‘That’s right.’

"…!"

A cold chill ran down Rokuda’s spine.

The voice he heard was unmistakably Akamura’s.

‘We’ve already obtained evidence that you’ve been outsourcing public works and siphoning funds through dummy companies. In exchange for your immunity, you’re going to confess to everything, is that right?’

‘Yes, that’s correct.’

‘I see. Without an internal whistleblower, it would have been difficult to bring this case forward.

But let me ask you this first. You were elected by the people to serve as a city councilor, weren’t you? And yet, you’ve been outsourcing public works projects that only harm your local community. Don’t you feel any shame as a public official?’

‘I don’t care what some people might think. I firmly believe that this is the best course of action.’

‘As a way to make money, you mean?’

‘Yes.’

At this point, Yamashika stopped the tape.

"Well, that should be enough, right? Akamura’s dead serious about making a deal. He’s ready to offer you up as a sacrificial lamb."

Presented with such tangible evidence, Rokuda had no choice but to believe it.

And if there was anyone left he could rely on now, it was this lawyer standing before him, grinning with a sinister smile.

"M-Mr. Yamashika... P-Please! I don’t want to be a scapegoat for that bastard! You have to save me! I’ll do anything!"

"Even if you say that... A plea bargain is basically a first-come, first-served deal. There’s no room for you to jump in now."

"No way...! S-So what am I supposed to do...?"

It was too cruel. He had run his own company into the ground, his family had abandoned him, and he had gotten involved in a scheme that siphoned citizens’ tax money. To cover up those crimes, he had committed even more.

And now, to have all the blame pinned solely on him—this was too unreasonable.

In utter despair, he collapsed to his knees and curled up on the floor.

But then, a voice spoke from above his bowed head.

"However, there’s one way—just one way you can strike back at them."

As if grasping at straws, Rokuda raised his head with a glimmer of hope.

"W-What is it...?"

Yamashika was grinning broadly.

第七章
復活の山鹿善行

Chapter 7: Zenko Yamashika’s Resurrection

January 17th, 10:00 AM, District Courtroom No. 3

The courtroom was, as always, packed to capacity on this day.

But strangely, the city councilor Akamura, who had been present until yesterday, was nowhere to be seen.

Perhaps he had sensed what was coming and fled. But that no longer mattered. Let him struggle all he wants.

As always, Takeda was fully absorbed in his work, and Togasaki, perhaps thinking I had no more tricks left, maintained his usual air of superiority, even more relaxed than usual.

However, today, I couldn’t be happier that he was acting like that. Because soon enough, I would twist that smug expression into one of utter defeat.

"Defense counsel Yamashika, are you ready?"

"Yes, of course, Your Honor."

"Very well. Who is the first witness today?"

"As a witness for the defense, we call Mr. Moegi Rokuda."

A look of suspicion flashed across Togasaki’s face.

Rokuda had never met the murdered Ebata directly. Given that, it was no surprise that Togasaki knew nothing of his existence.

For Rokuda, this might be the final spotlight of his life.

Dressed in what appeared to be his best suit, he stood at the witness stand, putting on a brave face with all his might.

"Now then, Mr. Rokuda, could you begin by telling us about your occupation?"

"Yes. I’m the president of a small construction company called Atamahane Inc."

"I'll get straight to the point. You conspired with the city councilor Akamura and Mr. Aotani, the head of the Finance Division at the city hall, to engage in corrupt public works outsourcing, didn't you?"

"Yes, just as you say."

"Wha—WHAAAAAAAAT!?"

The first to scream was Togasaki, and as if on cue, the courtroom erupted in gasps of shock from the audience.

"Order! Quiet down, all of you! The court can hold even spectators in contempt, you know!"

"I-I object, Your Honor! This witness has been deceived by the defense and is making statements meant to obstruct the trial!"

"Overruled. Defense counsel, please proceed."

"Thank you. Now, Mr. Rokuda, please explain in detail how this corruption was carried out."

"The company I was running had accumulated a large amount of debt and was on the verge of bankruptcy. At that point, the city councilor Akamura, who had taken on all that debt, made me an offer. He said that if I lent my company's name for public works outsourcing, he would pay me a monthly fee. With no other options besides hanging myself or fleeing in the night, I had no choice but to accept. Akamura had another ally: Mr. Aotani, who worked at the city hall. His role was to inform us of the planned bid prices for the public works projects. The three of us would win the bids and take a cut of about 10% from the bid price, while outsourcing the actual work to other contractors. The majority of the money we skimmed off was turned into slush funds and ended up in Akamura's pockets."

It was exactly the same story that the late Ebata had told me. I couldn't help but admire how Ebata had uncovered all this on his own.

At the very least, I would show my respect by avenging his death.

"Very well. Next, do you know a man named Hiroshi Ebata?"

"Yes, I do. He was the man we conspired to murder."

"W-What did you saaaaaaaaaay!?"

Togasaki was starting to lose it.

Once again, the courtroom was engulfed in uproar.

"Y-Your Honor! I raise an immediate objection!"

"Overruled for now. Defense counsel, continue."

"Yes, Your Honor. Mr. Rokuda, you just stated that you murdered Mr. Ebata. Could you explain the circumstances and how the murder was carried out?"

"I believe you know that Mr. Ebata was working as Councilor Akamura's secretary. We found out by chance that he was planning to blow the whistle on our operation. We also learned that he had sought your help for protection. That's when Councilor Akamura suggested we kill him. Mr. Aotani, who was in on the conspiracy, willingly offered his assistance, but I couldn't agree to it. However, I was a small-time player who couldn't survive without helping Akamura with his dirty deeds. In the end, I had no choice but to go along with the plan."

"So, how exactly did you murder Mr. Ebata?"

"We knew that you and Mr. Ebata were planning to visit Councilor Akamura's office to collect evidence of the corruption. So, Mr. Aotani and I snuck into the office, since neither of us had met Mr. Ebata directly. We waited for you to fall asleep after drinking the coffee we had laced with a sedative, and then we attacked Mr. Ebata. I grabbed him from behind in a chokehold, while Mr. Aotani stabbed him from the front with a large knife. However, Mr. Ebata resisted, causing Aotani's hand to slip, and the knife ended up cutting my arm."

Rokuda raised his bandaged right hand slightly, showing that his testimony was consistent with the injury.

"Afterward, we put Mr. Ebata and you into a car and drove to the riverbank. Our plan was to frame you, attorney Yamashika, by placing the knife used in the murder in your hand. However, the knife had my blood on it, so we had no choice but to stop at a store along the way, buy a new knife, smear it with Mr. Ebata's blood, and place that knife in your hand instead..."

"Do you have any evidence to support this?"

"Yes..."

Rokuda reached into his suit pocket and pulled something out.

It was a bloodstained knife, sealed in a plastic bag. The blade was about 20 centimeters long and had a menacing appearance.

"This is the knife that was actually used to stab Mr. Ebata. It has both Mr. Ebata's and my blood on it. Since I was wearing gloves, there shouldn't be any fingerprints."

"Thank you. That concludes my questions. Your Honor, I would like to submit this knife as Defense Exhibit A."

"...It will be accepted."

The courtroom fell into a heavy silence.

The only sound that broke the stillness was a strange groaning, "Agh, agh, agh," coming from Togasaki. This was the best moment for me.

"Now, Your Honor, as has just become clear, this is the true nature of the case. There is no longer any need for further trial proceedings. I would like to request that the jury be dismissed immediately and that the prosecution be advised to withdraw their charges."

A loud bang echoed as someone struck the desk. It was Togasaki.

"Y-Your Honor! I raise an objection!"

"Overruled. By the authority of this court, I am extending the trial indefinitely. Prosecutor Togasaki, you are ordered to have Defense Exhibit A examined and to verify this witness's testimony. You will submit a report by 5 PM today."

"But, Your Honor, that's far too—"

"Prosecutor Togasaki! Do you understand this court's order?"

"Eh... Y-Yes."

"Good. That will be all for today's proceedings."

The sharp crack of a gavel rang out.

At the same time, Togasaki's shoulders slumped in defeat.

January 17th, 1:00 PM, Yamashika Law Office

"Whew. Finally, I can sit down and relax."

Sinking into my familiar chair, I finally let out a deep breath.

"Thank you so much for all your hard work this time."

As always, Yukina quickly brought me a cup of tea.

"I'm still surprised. I can't believe Mr. Rokuda told the whole truth... Prosecutor Togasaki was completely dumbfounded."

"Well, I can't blame him. He put a lot of effort into that trial."

I sipped my green tea. The green tea that Yukina served after a trial was something special. There was no moment more relaxing than this.

"Still, you really managed to talk that guy Rokuda into it, huh?" The annoying brat butted in. "I mean, for Rokuda, testifying means he'd end up being charged with a crime too, right? If he had stayed quiet, they would've pinned the blame on Zenko instead. So why did things turn out that way? It probably has something to do with the interview Kageno did yesterday."

"Yeah, that's about right. I slightly tampered with that interview and used it to threaten Rokuda—"

Yesterday, when I visited Rokuda's house.

I altered the conversation from Kageno's interview with Akamura, making it seem like Akamura was trying to strike a plea deal, and I used that to threaten Rokuda.

Everything went as planned, and Rokuda crumpled in defeat.

And that's when I said this:

"But there's only one way—one way you can get back at those guys."

Perhaps a faint glimmer of hope lit up inside him, as Rokuda raised his head.

"A-And what is that...?"

I grinned and continued.

"Listen, the prosecution isn't going to make Akamura's plea deal public until my trial is over. Of course not—if it came out that public works were being outsourced under the table, it would only support my claim that I was caught up in the conspiracy. If that happens, not only will the police who arrested me be humiliated, but so will the prosecution that indicted me.

Here's your last chance. Rokuda, you're going to take the stand tomorrow as a witness for the defense. If you come forward and reveal everything in your own words—from the public works

outsourcing to the murder of Ebata—you'll at least be able to stop Akamura's plea deal. You'll also be able to show that you weren't the mastermind."

"W-Wait just a minute! But doesn't that mean I'll be held accountable too...? I didn't do anything wrong...!"

I had, of course, anticipated this objection. While the outsourcing scheme was one thing, there was no hard evidence linking him to Ebata's murder. Naturally, he'd try to weasel his way out of it.

That's exactly why—I mustered all my anger, took a deep breath, and suddenly roared at him.

"Shut up, you bastard!"

Rokuda went pale. My outburst was that intense.

"You ruined your company, lined your pockets with public works that were supposed to benefit the community, and on top of that, you killed a man with a bright future! You think there's some convenient escape route for a scumbag like you? If you've got even a shred of conscience left, the least you can do is confess like a man!"

"W-What!? W-Wait! I admit to the outsourcing, but I didn't kill anyone!"

"Don't lie! I know you injured your right hand. You accidentally hurt yourself when you stabbed the victim, didn't you? The original plan was to frame me by putting the murder weapon in my hand, but you couldn't do that because your own blood was on it. So you bought a new knife on the way to dump the body, smeared it with the victim's blood, and gave it to me. But too bad for you, I can prove the weapon was switched by the crime scene photos. Now, where's the real murder weapon with both your blood and the victim's? Should I get a court order and search this entire room?"

"N-No... You... even know that much..."

"Give it up. Even if you don't testify, you can't escape anymore."

Rokuda slumped like a puppet with its strings cut. It was only natural—once the truth had been laid out so plainly, there was nowhere left for him to run.

Now, for the final touch. After the whip, comes the carrot—that's the usual routine.

"Oh, right, let me give you some advice. You and Aotani killed Ebata together, didn't you? Here's what I think: Aotani held Ebata in a chokehold from behind, and you stabbed him from the front. If you don't say anything, your crime will be seen as more serious. So when you confess, say that Aotani was the one who stabbed him, not you. I won't get involved beyond that."

"...!"

"You don't have any other options. If you confess now, at least people will see that you felt some remorse and came clean. The prosecution might not care, but public opinion will see you as a hero. Your sentence might even be a little lighter. The important thing is to act before Akamura does."

Rokuda's shoulders slumped in defeat.

"I... understand..."

"—Well, that's how it went."

"...You really are a heartless bastard, aren't you?"

"Who cares? In the end, they're the ones who killed Ebata and tried to frame me."

And so, everything had gone exactly as I planned.

By the way, it seems that when Akamura heard from Aotani yesterday that I went to visit Rokuda and left the shabby apartment together with him, he panicked and tried to flee on the spot. That's why he didn't show up in court today. In the end, he was cornered by the police, who had been humiliated by me once again, and was taken into custody. It's only a matter of time before an arrest warrant is issued.

Though it's a shame. If Akamura had realized Rokuda had betrayed him yesterday, he could've gone straight to the prosecutor's office and actually struck a plea deal. His sentence might've been reduced a bit. But unlike Rokuda, Akamura probably just couldn't stand the thought of being labeled a criminal, no matter the severity of the charge.

Aotani was arrested at the city hall. Of course, Rokuda was also arrested, but honestly, I couldn't care less what happens to them now.

The only point of interest left is what will happen to Endai, the head of the criminal investigation department, who I keep saying fabricated evidence by hitting me, refused me access to a lawyer, and even planted my blood at the crime scene. But expecting the police to act swiftly against one of their own is probably asking too much.

It was then that I glanced at the clock and realized the appointed time was drawing near.

With that in mind, I decided to wake up Kageno, who was lying on someone else's sofa, signaling that my work was done.

"Hey, Kageno, don't sleep here today. I'll give you some money, so go spend the night at a manga cafe or something. Actually, it's not just Kageno. Sorry, but Yukina and the brat over there, too—could you guys take a little walk?"

Yukina and Satsuki looked at me with surprised faces.

"...Huh? Oh, I see. That person's coming, aren't they?"

Kageno was the only one who didn't seem surprised. Well, he already knew what was going on, so that was expected.

"I don't mind, but..." Yukina said. "Is something going to happen?"

I gave a sly grin and answered.

"Yeah. I've got a guest. A very important guest."

◆

And that guest arrived alone, ten minutes later.

"Thanks for coming straight here. I deliberately made sure Rokuda didn't mention you at today's trial. Do you understand what that means? Akamura and Aotani have both been arrested. It's only a matter of time before you're arrested too. But before that happens, there are some things I'd really like to ask you. Isn't that right, Kotone Kokushima? Or should I call you Akamura's spy?"

"..."

The woman—Kokushima—stared at me in silence.

Eventually, she let out a small sigh.

"...Since Mr. Rokuda betrayed us, I figured this would happen eventually. So you heard it from him?"

"Yeah, I confirmed it with Rokuda. Although, I'd already figured it out before that."

"...You didn’t show any signs at all. When did you realize? What was your reason?"

"You, as long as you’re wearing a uniform, might pass for a high school girl, but in reality, you're shaving off quite a few years from your real age, aren't you?"

"…And what does that have to do with anything?"

There was a slight hint of anger in her voice. You shouldn't point out a woman’s age.

"Well, it's just that lately, everything I've been doing has been backfiring on me. Thanks to that, I've started to adopt the motto: 'Everyone’s a thief until proven otherwise.'"

"What kind of life are you living, you scam artist lawyer?"

"Mind your own business. Anyway, I had Kageno look into you as well. That was yesterday. And it didn’t take long to find out. Your surname, 'Kokushima,' isn’t written with the kanji for 'grain' as you claimed, but with the kanji for 'black'—making it more like 'Kuroshima.' And you're actually twenty-five years old."

"…It’s up to me how I write my name. Same with my age."

"Passing yourself off as a high school student was a bit much, though. I get it—you needed that to get close to Ebata. I never would’ve guessed that such a straight-laced guy had a school uniform fetish."

"……"

This, too, came from Kageno’s investigation. Apparently, there were DVDs like that under Ebata’s bed.

A school uniform fetish isn’t that unusual. Even I’ve thought about seeing Yukina in a sailor uniform once or twice. But Ebata’s weakness was exploited, and that’s how Kokushima got close to him.

"And then, a few days ago, a lawyer I know made an offhand comment. Akamura, Aotani, Rokuda. Red, blue, and green. The three primary colors. When you mix them, they turn black. So I started to suspect that you might be the mastermind."

"..."

"Don’t look so scared, that was just a joke. But yeah, something trivial like that was the spark. When you think about it, way too much of our information was leaking to the enemy in this case. The time we snuck into Ebata and Akamura’s office got completely leaked. And you remember that guy, Minekami? He was supposed to testify on our side in court, but suddenly, he betrayed

us. I couldn’t understand why he would turn against us. The detective Kageno tracked down Minekami, and his investigations are usually pretty reliable. Given that Minekami was a witness brought in by Kageno, it didn’t make sense for him to betray us.

There’s only one explanation. That guy Minekami really did intend to expose Akamura’s crimes at first. But before he was going to testify, he asked me to be careful about his privacy. In other words, he was that afraid of earning the wrath of Akamura and his associates. So if Minekami suddenly betrayed us overnight, it means his name got leaked to Akamura’s side. And you—the spy who infiltrated us—are the one who leaked it. After that, Minekami had no choice but to stay quiet after being threatened by Akamura. I got careless. I shouldn’t have mentioned his name in front of you without considering that possibility."

"..."

"That’s not all. When I snuck into Ebata’s office, Ebata offered me some coffee. He said it was to leave evidence that I had been there. I didn’t suspect there might be drugs in it, so at the time, I thought it was a good idea. But Ebata said the idea wasn’t his own. I thought maybe he got it from some mystery novel, but no—it was a suggestion from his lover, wasn’t it? Without that suggestion, there’s no guarantee I would’ve actually drunk the drugged coffee."

"..."

Kokushima remained silent, just listening as before.

"Don’t just sit there silently. Say something. This isn’t any fun."

"…Fine. As for Minekami, you're right. I did tell Akamura his name.

But let me correct a couple of things. I’m not the mastermind, and I’m not going to be arrested. That’s because I was just following Akamura’s orders to spy on you. I’m the tragic heroine whose lover was murdered, remember? Even if I took such actions out of hatred for you, the man who was arrested for the crime, no one would really question it, would they? As for the idea of leaving evidence in the coffee cup, Ebata probably got that from some mystery novel he read. It had nothing to do with me."

"Interesting counterargument. If I were your lawyer, I’d probably make the same claim. However, there’s one thing you’ve overlooked."

"…What would that be?"

"Rokuda. That guy's a loser who ruined his company, had his family abandon him, and ended up being used as a pawn in a crime. But when you hit rock bottom like that, you do learn a few things. That guy had something prepared for a while now."

With that, I pressed the play button on the tape recorder sitting on my desk.

The tape Rokuda gave me was already set inside.

"—And that's how it is. Setting up that wiretap microphone was worth the effort, wasn't it? Mr. Akamura, it seems your secretary is seriously planning to expose us. And of all people, they're planning to ask that lawyer, Yamashika, for help. We need to deal with this before it's too late."

"……Indeed, hearing this tape leaves me no choice but to believe it. We have to do something. It's only natural, but you'll help me out too, right?"

"Yes, given the situation, I will cooperate."

"W-Wait a minute, Mr. Aotani! Mr. Akamura, isn't this whole mess originally because of your secretary's misconduct? Why should we be the ones to clean up after it?"

"Hey, Rokuda. Who do you think helped you when you were drowning in debt, when your family ran away, and you were on the brink of either skipping town or hanging yourself, huh? And that's not all. Who do you think has been throwing you 1500 dollars every month just for lending your company's name, without asking you to do anything in return, huh?"

"N-No, I'm really grateful for that, no doubt about it. But still, this and that are two different things... So, Mr. Akamura, what exactly do you plan on doing about this?"

"Isn't it obvious? There's no way we can bring that whistleblower back into the fold now, especially after he's plotted an internal expose. And on top of that, the young man knows too much. So, there's only one option."

"…W-Wait, you're not saying… kill him, are you?"

"I think there's no other choice. Do you have a cleaner solution?"

At this point, I stopped the tape.

It seemed to have had quite the effect. For the first time, I could see a flicker of emotion on Kokushima's face.

"There's quite a bit of background noise, and your voice and Aotani's sound similar, so it was hard to discern at first. But the first and last voices in this conversation—they're yours, aren't they?"

"…I can’t believe such a tape exists."

"Have you come to terms with it? Are you ready to admit it?"

"Yes, I’ll admit it. What you’re saying is true. But even with a tape this hard to make out, you can’t arrest someone. All I need is one decent lawyer, like yourself, to get me off the hook."

"Well, we’ll see about that. You’ve just admitted your crime in front of a police officer."

"…What?"

Kokushima’s face turned pale.

"W-What are you talking about?"

"There’s one thing I have to apologize for. You see that door over there connecting to the next room? Normally, it’s a pretty soundproof door. But recently, the frame’s gotten a bit loose, leaving a gap. That means voices from this room can easily be heard in the next. In other words, this is what’s going on. Hey, it’s about time, come on out, you thug cop!"

"Shut up! I’m not your errand boy, don’t order me around!"

With a bang, the door flew open, and out stepped—

"Oh, excuse me. I’m Detective Inaba. Ms. Kokushima, I’m sorry, but would you mind coming with me to the station?"

"Wha—"

Kokushima’s face twisted.

She looked over at me with that same expression.

But soon, a faint smile appeared, as if she had accepted defeat.

"…I see. It looks like I’ve lost."

"I’m glad you understand. So, while we’re at it, tell me one more thing."

"And what would that be?"

"Why didn’t you kill me? You knew I was an experienced criminal defense lawyer, didn’t you? Didn’t you think I’d become a problem for you if you let me live?"

"…That’s not it. We planned to kill you along with the others. That’s why we mixed such a strong sleeping drug into the coffee. We thought that if you were found dead, frozen in that cruising spot after passing out, the police would simply think it was a crime of passion gone wrong.”

I see. So that’s how it was.

"Hearing it straight from your lips really sends a chill down my spine."

"I find it strange too. Why are you still alive?"

“Well, who knows. My love life may be a disaster lately, but my luck at staying alive is pretty strong.”

"…I see. Hearing that from you, I can accept it.”

"Are we done here? Come on, let’s go."

Detective Inaba grabbed her arm and tried to pull her along.

But surprisingly, Kokushima resisted and said one last thing to me.

"Mr. Yamashika. One last thing. Lawyers really are idiots, aren’t they?"

"Hmph, is that just some final sour grapes? That’s not like you."

"No, it’s not that. Red, blue, and green are the primary colors of light. When you mix all three, you get white. It’s the primary colors of pigments—red, blue, and yellow—that mix to make black."

"..."

With that, Kokushima finally disappeared from my sight.

A lawyer only needs to know the law—that's an excuse I decided I would never make again.

So, they really intended to kill me, huh? Now that I think about it, that explains a lot. If I had frozen to death at that cruising spot, holding the knife covered in Ebata’s blood, everyone would’ve been convinced it was a lovers’ suicide. Just like Kokushima said, it’s a wonder I’m still alive after drinking that drug.

…Wait a minute.

Now that I think about it, before I went to Akamura's office, I drank some green tea that Yukina had made for me. I've heard people say you shouldn't take medicine with things that contain tannins. Something about the drug's properties changing in subtle ways.

So that's it. I've figured it out.

Yukina was my lucky charm after all.

…No, wait.

At that moment, I remembered one terrifying fact.

Things you shouldn't drink while taking medication. Green tea is one. Milk and grapefruit juice are also bad, apparently.

And then there's one more thing—carbonated drinks.

Afterword

So, how did you like the ninth volume of "Tactical Judgment"?

It's been over half a year since the release of the previous volume ("Short Story Collection SS Volume 3"). I deeply apologize to all the readers who were eagerly awaiting this new release. However, the extra time allowed me to carefully develop the story, so if you enjoyed this book even a little, it would bring me no greater joy as a writer.

…Starting with such a formal introduction makes it difficult to know how to continue from here.

Anyway, without any particular connection to the previous topic, let me give you a brief update on my recent activities.

It was a certain Saturday, a heavenly day when I had just finished the manuscript for this long novel and had no urgent work ahead of me. I spent the entire day holed up at home and later had dinner at a major chain restaurant, where I ordered a set meal.

But that was the beginning of my misfortune.

The next day, I suddenly started having terrible stomach issues. Well, I've always had a tendency to get sick whenever I let my guard down, and I've had plenty of stomach problems before, so I just took some over-the-counter digestive medicine and ignored it...

But by Monday, it still hadn't improved. In fact, by the evening, I felt lethargic and feverish, as if I had caught a cold. I figured maybe the cold virus had spread from my stomach to my whole body, so I took some fever reducers and went to bed. That night, my temperature shot up to 38 degrees, and I spent the entire night writhing in the typical discomfort of a fever. But perhaps because I sweated it out, when I woke up on Tuesday, I felt much better, and my fever had gone down.

My stomach was still not in great shape, but since my fever had broken, I figured one more day of rest should be enough to recover.

Or so I thought.

But by nightfall, my stomach still hadn't improved, and on top of that, I was now dealing with a headache that kept me up until dawn. I had no choice but to take more painkillers and somehow managed to fall asleep…

And then, the next day—Wednesday. When I woke up, I was hit with intense stomach pain. I rushed to the bathroom in a panic.

…From that point on, every 30 minutes, I was struck by violent stomach cramps, forcing me to run to the bathroom again and again. It was a day of sheer terror.

Even though my stomach should have been empty, there was no sign of the bathroom trips decreasing. Lying down only made my stomach feel like it was twisting in knots, so I couldn't sleep at all. In the end, I didn't get a wink of sleep that entire day. On the bright side, I managed to level up six of my Pokémon to level 20, though I'll keep that as a small secret.

And then, the next morning. By this point, it was clear something was seriously wrong. There was no way this could still be just a cold. I began to suspect that maybe the set meal I ate might have caused food poisoning. I couldn't sleep anyway, so I got up and turned on my computer. I searched for "food poisoning" at around 7 AM.

And there it was: Vibrio parahaemolyticus. Incubation period: 12 to 24 hours. Symptoms: diarrhea, stabbing stomach pain, fever. My symptoms had started the day after I ate the set meal, and everything matched perfectly.

If it were just a cold, I'd accept that it was my own fault for not taking care of myself. But food poisoning is different. I was furious. The idea that the reason I had been suffering from such excruciating stomach pain for days might have been due to the restaurant's poor hygiene? Unforgivable, XXXX. (Note: The number of X has no relation to the restaurant's name).

At that moment, I made up my mind.

No joke—I was going to sue them. And turn this into a story.

So, clutching my aching stomach, with my face pale, I rushed to the hospital to get proof. This was just before 9 am that day.

The hospital was offering free consultations for elderly patients, so the waiting room was filled with old men and women. There I was, a lone member of the "future unemployed army," feeling the weight of their stares.

While battling the increasing stomach pain, I finally got to see the doctor.

…Sorry, I have to stop here. It seems that, due to the nature of the medical examination, the rest of this story would involve some rather inappropriate bodily functions. My editor, Mr. S, has put his foot down and told me not to write any further. Please bear with this for now. Of course, I'll reveal the outcome in some form later on.

In any case, if you ever experience stomach pain that keeps you up for days, don't push through it—go to the hospital.

Now that I've finished my personal update, let's talk a little about my upcoming projects.

Some of you may already know, but I had planned to start a new series around June of this year. However, starting a new series is always difficult, and I ended up scrapping it rather quickly.

That said, I now have two unpublished manuscripts sitting on my desk, and I'm hoping to revise them and show them to you all by this coming spring.

As for the genre, it went through various twists and turns, but it looks like it'll end up being a fantasy. Jumping from legal thrillers to fantasy might seem a bit abrupt, but I grew up reading "Record of Lodoss War", "Slayers", "Sword World", and "The Lord of the Rings", so I've always wanted to try my hand at writing something like that. As for the content, my editor Mr. S said that it would be a story set in a knight's world where 'someone like Yamashika, who only moves when drunk,' would show up. That's probably not far off.

So, when it gets a bit warmer (probably), if you see a book by Toru Shiwasu on the shelves of Fujimi Fantasia Bunko (hopefully), I'd be grateful if you'd pick it up.

Now, putting the new work aside, let's talk about the next "Tactical Judgment" series. As you may have noticed from the book's cover, this volume wraps up the first part of the series.

However, as the author, I still have plenty of ideas left to explore, and the "Short Story Collection SS" is still ongoing. Neither my editor Mr. S nor I have any plans to end the series here. In fact, we've already made considerable progress on the second part. Essentially, we're thinking, "Maybe it's time for someone other than Yamashika to be the main character?" and that's the direction we're heading in with this reboot.

That said, I've been warned by Mr. S not to make any definitive statements, given my past of saying things like, "Next up, we'll do a civil trial arc!" and then quickly changing my mind. I'm hoping to release the new "Tactical" by next year if all goes well, but in the meantime, I'd appreciate it if you could keep an eye out for the new fantasy-style series I mentioned earlier.

By the way, as I briefly mentioned in a previous afterword, I'm still working on the civil trial arc. Yes, really.

Right now, I'm attending a certain civil trial from the very first hearing as part of my research with the help of some legal experts. However, real-life civil trials are incredibly tedious. While the content is serious and deals with important matters, to a bystander, it's quite boring. The hearings, which are impossible to follow without legal knowledge, are held about once every two months.

It's been a year since I started attending, and not a single witness has been called. All I've seen is the back-and-forth of documents between the plaintiff and the defendant.

So, the civil trial arc will likely be a long way off, but no matter what, I promise you this, dear readers:

There will be even more misfortune for the protagonist, so please look forward to it.

Continuing from the previous discussion, I haven't yet received the results of the tests to determine whether it was food poisoning. However, if it turns out to be food poisoning, I will definitely use it as material for the new "Tactical". Even if it wasn't food poisoning—I'll probably turn it into a short story anyway.

Well then, that's all for now.

I hope we can meet again in a slightly shorter time…

Toru Shiwasu

Postscript 1

Recently, a law called the "Act on the Proper Conduct of Detective Business" was apparently enacted.

Because of this, the detective business now requires registration and is subject to confidentiality obligations. In other words, there's a line in this series where Yamashika says something like, "Being a detective is great, you don't need any qualifications." But this has now become quite untrue. Please take note.

Postscript 2

Note: This postscript contains slight spoilers. I imagine some of you might be reading the afterword first before the main story, but I urge you to stop reading any further.

…Alright, now that we've gotten that out of the way.

There's a scene in this book where Yamashika, after voluntarily accompanying the police, is being interrogated and has a bit of a verbal sparring match with the detective. Regarding whether someone has the right to choose a lawyer during an interrogation after voluntarily accompanying the police, I'd like to add a little explanation.

Article 34 of the Constitution of Japan states, "No person shall be apprehended or detained without being informed of the charges and without the immediate privilege of counsel." This means that, constitutionally, if someone's freedom is restricted, they are guaranteed the right to consult with a lawyer. Furthermore, Article 30 of the Code of Criminal Procedure states, "The accused or suspect may, at any time, appoint a defense counsel."

From these provisions, it seems that Yamashika did indeed have the right to consult a lawyer. However, in the case of "voluntary accompaniment," as the name suggests, it is voluntary, meaning that one is technically free to leave at any time. In other words, since their freedom is not being restricted, the right to appoint a lawyer during interrogation after voluntary accompaniment does not apply—this is a point of legal contention that apparently still exists.

Having Yamashika and the chief detective debate this issue seemed like it would be quite tedious—sorry, I mean, it wasn't particularly relevant to the main story, so I decided to wrap it up appropriately in the text.

Additionally, when I confirmed with an actual lawyer, they said that even during interrogation after voluntary accompaniment, there should be no doubt that the right to consult with a lawyer exists. However, they also remarked that, in the confined space of an interrogation room, it wouldn't be surprising if certain things went unnoticed, so to speak.

By the way, this is just a side note, but there's an odd aspect of the current legal system: if you can afford to hire a private lawyer, you can appoint one during the "suspect" phase (i.e., when a person is suspected of a crime but has not yet been indicted), but if you cannot afford a lawyer, meaning you need to rely on a court-appointed attorney, you won't be assigned one until after the prosecution has indicted you and you've become a "defendant."

However, this was deemed unfair, and just a month before this book's release, in October 2006, a new system called the "Court-Appointed Attorney for Suspects System" was introduced. As the name suggests, this system allows court-appointed attorneys to be assigned from the suspect phase. (However, this is limited to serious criminal cases.)

One more thing to add: as I mentioned in a previous afterword, no matter how much research you do, if you misinterpret your findings, it all becomes meaningless—just like how comparing two different newspapers can lead to different understandings of the same event. While the information I've shared here has been gathered through interviews with lawyers, I cannot guarantee that my interpretation is entirely accurate.

So, if you ever find yourself in a situation where you're taken to the police station and interrogated, please, do not rely on the information from this book.

What I'm trying to say is, if any of you readers have a mobile phone, it might be a good idea to store the phone number of your local bar association. That's the punchline.

師走トオル

しわすとおる●埼玉県在住。『タクティカル・ジャッジメント』で第2回富士見ヤングミステリー大賞準入選に。同作にて作家デビュー。その後、新シリーズ『がらくたのフロンティア』を発表。ゲームと名のつくものなら、なんでも大好き。特技・おやじギャグ。弱点・スギ花粉。最近は山にも登る。

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